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# **Inventory's Paper Assembly: Fierce Sociology, Sovereignty and Self- Organisation in London's Small Press Publishing Scene 1995 to 2005**

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**A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of PhD**

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Dedicated to Damian Abbott whose friendship, intelligence and passion shall not be forgotten.

# Abstract

This study attempts to deliver an intellectual history of the journal *Inventory* and its place within theories of knowledge, publishing, artistic practice, ethnography, politics and critical theory. The initial movement of the thesis, **Chapter 1**, establishes *Inventory*'s formal structure as a journal. **Chapter 2** establishes the presuppositions and models for the use of a journal or magazine as a platform for heterodox cultural practice and inquiry. The study then follows *Inventory*'s proposition of a method derived from the fusion of the heterogeneous sociology of Georges Bataille and his circle in **Chapter 3**; and the speculative aesthetic theory, and 'anthropological materialism', of Walter Benjamin in **Chapter 4**. In **Chapters 3 and 4** *Inventory*'s 'constellation of methods': surrealism – as a mode of research and publishing, rather than as a visual art – meets ethnography, the study of the culture of all humankind on a common plane of praxis. This partisan reappropriation of surrealist and ethnographic method is shown to generate a complex para-academic publishing and research project, one which has a relation to, but ultimately exceeds, contemporary theories of either the 'artist as anthropologist' (Joseph Kosuth), 'ethnographic surrealism' (James Clifford) or 'the artist as ethnographer' (Hal Foster). **Chapter 5** discusses the journal's presentation as writing or literature and the relation between the whole and its parts developed philosophically in the previous chapters in terms of the form of the journal itself as a constellation and the writing it cohered around and presented. This chapter therefore also discusses the development of mental or perceptual spaces of resistance to the restructuring of space discusses in the preceding chapter through experimental writing and publishing (artist projects, found texts, visionary or prophetic texts). The study subsequently situates the intellectual and cultural productions of *Inventory* journal within the dynamic social, political and cultural context of London in the 1990s and 2000s. This contextualisation is achieved by engagement, in **Chapter 6**, with a specific site of dissemination for *Inventory*, Info Centre (1999-2000), through it the journal associated with parallel cultural and political practices of self-publishing and self-organisation by artists, writers and activists in the late-1990s and 2000s. I argue that these practices sought to challenge existing forms of organisation, knowledge production, cultural and social totality during a period of capitalist restructuring of work, social reproduction, the urban environment and the institutions of art. The opposition to this restructuring and its re-colonisation of space in London is conceived both in terms of the production of critical commentaries on the production of space in the city (urban sociology, psychogeography); contesting established cultural histories (e.g. of surrealism, the Situationist International and

conceptual art); creation of small autonomous institutions and development of mental or perceptual spaces of resistance through experimental writing and publishing. I argue that *Inventory* itself takes on a 'self-institutional' form in this situation, and as journal provides a space and singular spaces (in terms of individual contributions) for independent critical thinking (artist projects, urban sociology, found texts, visionary or prophetic texts). **Chapter 7** presents the journal's contribution to critical accounts of practices and legacies of urbanism (housing, city planning, spatial practices and government) in London in the post-war period and during the period of the journal's publication (1995-2005). The journal's identification of, and opposition to, forces restructuring London spatially during this period is conceived in terms of the production of critical commentaries on the production of space in the city (urban sociology and psychogeography). **The Conclusion** evaluates the aims of the study and reevaluates *Inventory* journal on the basis of the critical traditions surveyed in the prior chapters and in terms of problems arising from the path the journal followed and gaps between its projected programme or method and the achievements it attained.

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The commodity hides in stores, in warehouses – in inventory. Yet it has no mystery comparable to the mystery of nature. The enigma of the commodity is entirely social. It is the enigma of money and property, of specific needs and the demand-money-satisfaction cycle. The commodity asks for nothing better than to appear. And appear it does – visible/readable, in shop windows and on display racks. Self-exhibition is its forte.

– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974

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**Middlesex University**

**PhD Thesis**

**April 2019**

**Introduction**

**Inventory's Paper Assembly**

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# Introduction

This study constitutes the beginning of an intellectual history and assessment of *Inventory*, an artist-initiated and run journal which began in 1995 and ceased activity in 2005.<sup>1</sup> The thesis approaches this journal as a collaborative cultural artefact, which depended upon collaboration and reciprocity for its material production, circulation and attainment of cultural meaning.<sup>2</sup> The title of this thesis, *Paper Assembly*<sup>3</sup>, highlights the madeness of the object under study in two primary senses: as an object it is understood to be a constellation or an ensemble – ‘a group of items viewed as a whole rather than individually’<sup>4</sup>; as an ‘assembly’ it alludes to ‘the action of gathering together as a group for a common purpose.’<sup>5</sup> An assembly may involve a gathering of people for debate, protest, military action, games, religious ceremony or other activities. The term assembly is deliberately chosen here for this study on the journal because the group’s publishing methodology encouraged and emphasised the potentially political and aesthetic slippages between meanings produced by bringing heterogeneous elements together, both *people* and *things*. Assembly’s proximity to assemblage means it can also be understood to be ‘a collection or gathering of things or people’; ‘a machine or object made of pieces fitted together’ and ‘a work of art made by grouping together found or unrelated objects’.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, assembly is an action of putting together, just as is ‘inventory’ the act of collecting or listing. The fact that both these terms are verbs denoting an ongoing process of doing is relevant because rather than understanding publication (‘paper’) to be the end of a process, the way *Inventory* described their practice and the position of the journal in it consistently alluded to action, incompleteness and continuity as opposed to finality. The journal as an object of study is therefore to

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<sup>1</sup> *Inventory* journal ceased in 2005 but this was not the end of the group either in terms of exhibition or publishing practice. The group has staged exhibitions in London (2014), <http://www.robtufnell.com/Exhibitions/Inventory/inventory01.html> [Accessed 2 May 2017] and in 2018, close to the date of submission of this thesis, *Inventory* produced a short book of their writing, *The Counsel of Spent* with ‘Book Works as part of Common Objectives, guest edited by Nina Power, in an edition of 1,000 copies’, <https://www.bookworks.org.uk/node/1941> [Accessed 4 February 2019]

<sup>2</sup> The details of the origins and complex network of collaboration behind the journal are fully explored in Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> The title is drawn from an essay published in *Inventory* journal. Damian Abbott, ‘Paper Assembly’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.78-83.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Assembly’, ‘Assemblage’ and ‘Ensemble’ as defined by google.co.uk [Accessed 2 February 2016]

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Assemblage’ as defined by google.co.uk [Accessed 2 February 2016]

be considered both as complete or whole and as fragment.<sup>7</sup> *Inventory* is understood then in this study as a serial object or edition and a process that its publishers developed and performed. It is understood as an action, or a conglomeration of activities brought together as a unified action, as a practice. *Inventory* could be considered as a mimetic spoof of a journal of academic research which ended up contributing some very good research. Like fragment and whole, figure and ground, earnest mimesis and satire can, through artifice, confuse what is the authentic in such a way as to sharpen and intensify perception (of both the authentic object and copy) rather than simply baffle and confuse. I therefore propose to take *Inventory*'s contribution to knowledge seriously, but I shall also take the strategy of mimesis, and humour, seriously as an artistic technique and as a marker productive of difficulty, difference and self-consciousness.

As artists, who also made work individually, and together under the journal's name, *Inventory* developed a publishing model of which it could be said, after Walter Benjamin's phrase, encouraged a 'strict alternation between action and writing' and sought to catalyse 'active communities' of reading and being in the world.<sup>8</sup> In the journal this was developed through a number of separate specific strategies and areas: an open submissions policy which gathered contributions from far and wide in a disciplinary and geographical sense; an orientation towards publishing topographical essays or reports from specific sites; carrying out derives, walks, surveys or other actions as a group and reporting these back to the journal; publishing 'found texts' where language sometimes came closer to incantation or curse and the glossary section in which *definitions* have a strong, but also imaginative, phenomenal relation to *things*.

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<sup>7</sup> In this sense it is close to what, considering Gerhard Richter's *Atlas Archive*, Peter Osborne's describes as 'a highly selective fragment [...] which, in archetypically philosophically Romantic fashion, uses its title to refer to that figuring of the absent totality that the fragment performs, negatively.' Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London ; New York: Verso Books, 2013, p.90 Conceptualisation of the edifice of *Inventory* as whole and fragment is a theme of this whole study, but is further developed in a concentrated way in Chapter 1, Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, (Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter), London: New Left Books, 1979, p.78.

## Biographical Sketch of *Inventory*'s Editors and Contributors

*Inventory* is a journal established in 1995 as 'a collective enterprise by a group of writers, artists and theorists' by the journal's editors Damian Abbott, Paul Claydon and Adam Scrivener<sup>9</sup>, who met studying together on a Masters in Art and Theory programme at Chelsea College of Art in 1991. This was a part time education programme self-consciously conceived for artists and writers in part-time work engaged in post-studio practice.<sup>10</sup> The journal ran for 15 consecutive issues from 1995 to 2005.<sup>11</sup> The journal began as a proposal for a college project and funding was obtained from Chelsea College in 1992 by members of the core editorial group.<sup>12</sup> A second group of artists and writers (Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Tony deSilva, James Vanderpool, Morisa and Jake Miller<sup>13</sup>),

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Scrivener, Damian Abbot and Paul Claydon were the main editors throughout the life of the journal and are understood as the 'core editorial group' for the purposes of this study. However, Damian Abbot, Paul Claydon, Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Kathrynne Holmes, and Gautier Deblonde are all mentioned as founding members of the group in Adam Scrivener, 'Curriculum Vitae', <http://www.wildcapital.net/> [accessed 5/02/18]. Furthermore my interviews indicate that Simon Neville and Nick Norton justifiably belong to a second founding group who are discussed further above. Gautier Deblonde and Kathrynne Holmes were only ever infrequent contributors to the journal.

<sup>10</sup> The course 'was intended for practising artists who wanted to explore some theoretical issues related to their practice. [...] the seminars unfolded by members of staff and students leading, presenting or reading papers on topics related to their research within the two thematic strands. The seminars were for two years - you could then leave with a Graduate Diploma, or make a dissertation proposal and take another year to write a 12,000 word dissertation for a Masters. [...] it was research focussed, very self directed, slightly chaotic but very intense. [...] the course was fantastic, it pre-figured practice based PhD research, and nurtured a range of artists, future tutors, researchers and writers. [...] You gained entry with a one page research proposal and portfolio, and then through presenting papers you could re-focus your research as it evolved, you could literally follow your interests. [...] I should also say that 'practice' was loosely described, there were curators, critics, teachers, doctors, etc. [...] reading and writing was woven through the research process. Writing was definitely one of the 'practices' nurtured by the course.' Neil Cummings interviewed by the author, 1 June 2018, transcript included in appendix.

<sup>11</sup> The entire run of the journal consists of thirteen single issues and one double Tenth anniversary issue amounting to a total of 14 printed items. On commencement of this study the journal had lapsed for almost 10 years. However, two core members of the core editorial group continue exhibiting and writing under the name *Inventory*, and in 2014 this group (Paul Claydon and Adam Scrivener) were commissioned to publish a book by arts organisation Bookworks. This book, titled *The Council of Spent*, was published in 2018, *Inventory, The Council of Spent*, London: Bookworks, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> The initial funding was controversial and challenged by the College since the group did not deliver a college magazine, but rather their own vehicle. Adam Scrivener in conversation with the author, 2016, see also 'Interview with Neil Cummings' in the Appendices to this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> Jake Miller is not known to have contributed to the journal, but he supported the group as the Director of the Approach Gallery, representing and promoting *Inventory*'s work internationally, and providing exhibition space for

with whom Scrivener studied with at Middlesex University in the late 1980s, were supporters of, contributors to, and informed this project in multiple capacities.<sup>14</sup> This second group collectively produced a text, 'The Profound Purchase' (1989-1990) which pre-empted significant themes for *Inventory* and the practice of 'writing in common'. The group made a performative reading of this text recorded on video (subsequently lost) and distributed the text close to the staging of their Middlesex graduation exhibition. The group who made the text subsequently discussed a possible common project, including ideas for a journal.<sup>15</sup> An important supporter from this period and after was Patrick Keiller, filmmaker and architectural historian, who was a tutor at Middlesex University and continued to meet, correspond with and support editors and contributors to the journal later on.<sup>16</sup> Tony deSilva contributed only an enigmatic note to the journal's first issue while Simon Neville and Nick Norton were subsequently persistent contributors to the journal.<sup>17</sup> Both Norton and Neville were in frequent communication with Scrivener, and thereby informed its key concerns,

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3 solo exhibitions: *Re: Presentations of Everyday Life* (2004) *Requiem For The Empty Quarter* (2002) and *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* (1999/2000) and a group exhibition *A to Z* (1998). Miller also represented photographic conceptual artist John Stezaker, who taught Scrivener, Abbott and Claydon at Chelsea College.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Profound Purchase, whatever its merits or faults, was an experimental attempt by us to achieve some sort of collective theorising, and therefore it is significant and important.' Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, 31/07/2016. Adam Scrivener, in conversation with the author July, 2017, claims the idea for 'a project' was frequently discussed amongst this group of Middlesex University fine Art graduates, the idea for a journal came up in discussion only once and did not develop further until the later formation at Chelsea College. During the journal's existence Nick Norton frequently offered editorial and conceptual advice via correspondence in an informal capacity.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Scrivener in conversation July, 2015, and August, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Keiller was solicited to, and discussed with Scrivener, contributing to the journal (Adam Scrivener in conversation with the author August, 2016). At Middlesex Keiller introduced Scrivener, Neville and Norton to a politicised reading of the surrealist movement which related closely to his twinned interests in urbanism and filmmaking. 'Although Patrick was personal tutor in the 3rd year he also had regular tutorials with me throughout the 3 years. [...] I think - in short - Patrick Keiller should be noted as a great tutor (as well as filmmaker/writer) for all the reasons which also make his film-work enduring: silence - long scrutiny - pointed observation - subversive humour - concern. [...] he remains supportive. [...] Although his style is not mine, the method of working [sic]/researching is similar. [...] He was the person who pointed out the Hornsey occupation and wondered why this history was not available (easily) or talked about. Situationists & films of Cedric Price designed easy assemble house. [...] Kept in touch immediately after the course, invited to film launch of the release just prior to London. When working on London we met up in the Spanish Bar - off Hanway Street - and talked of smog, Poe's man in the crowd, him losing a notebook in a telephone box (and finding it again) - and our drinking was above his usual intake. ((We? Adam, Tony de Silva, James Vanderpool - my immediate recall.)) [...] Patrick was the person who put me onto the Humphrey Jennings book *Pandemonium* - which I loved (love - still have the copy I read 88/89) - thinking of Mass Observation.' Email correspondence between Nick Norton and the author, 10-11 October 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless one must consider the prospect that unwritten contributions to *Inventory* we considered substantial or decisive at the time. de Silva's role is firmly acknowledged by Norton cf. Appendices: 'Interview with Nick Norton'.

they are therefore treated as a second editorial group.<sup>18</sup>

*Inventory*'s core editorial group began planning the journal and organised exhibitions together, in collaboration with the secondary group, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, UCL Little Magazines Collection and Museum of Mankind in 1994. The first issue of the journal was published in 1995. From this point on, *Inventory* developed as the name for a journal; the editorial collective working on the eponymous journal; and an art group who coordinated the journal and made performances, exhibitions, public art works, posters and stickers. The editorial group (Abbott, Claydon and Scrivener) began planning the journal and organised exhibitions (both small foyer installations) together under the moniker 'Inventory' at the School of Oriental and African Studies and Museum of Mankind in 1994. The first issue of the journal was published in 1995 (Vol.1 No.1) with the strapline: 'Losing Finding Collecting'.<sup>19</sup> The loose collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the journal was established from the first issue and frequently updated, as the editorial group put it in 1999:

*Inventory* is a collective enterprise set up by a group of writers, artists, and theorists looking to explore alternatives to the limitations imposed on these disciplines. It operates on a number of fronts: as an experimental journal, in the presentation of material in diverse formats and as an ongoing process whose form we can only guess at.<sup>20</sup>

The members of the group contributed individually authored articles, essays and art projects to the journal as well as authoring texts collectively as 'Inventory'. The core group, Damian Abbott, Paul Claydon and Adam Scrivener, remained primary to each of these endeavours, but with a number of other collaborators, particularly Simon Neville and Nick Norton, from the earlier group, writing, contributing editorial advice, occasionally participating in exhibitions and assisting the core group with these practices. An aspect of this study shall therefore necessarily specify precisely what relations *Inventory* as a 'collective enterprise' entailed, between themselves as editors, artists,

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<sup>18</sup> 'There would be long conversations, often not directly about journal content although, really, everything was focussed through or toward this entity known as *Inventory*.' Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, 31/072016. For an extended dialogue on these matters see Appendices: Interview with Nick Norton.

<sup>19</sup> A first use of this phrase 'finding, losing, collecting' can be found in Nick Norton's video, *Array*, 1989, first exhibited at Middlesex Polytechnic Fine Art final year exhibition, <https://youtu.be/ARpbjN6nXv8> [Accessed 11 February, 2019]

<sup>20</sup> *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh (Ed.), *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

writers and theorists, as well as between the editors, other contributors and readers. Alongside the journal I consider a selection of projects – ‘presentation[s] of material in diverse formats’ – where they have a significant bearing on the conception of the journal itself, or offer opportunities to further specify the combinations of media and of practices which the journal drew upon.<sup>21</sup> This study focusses primarily on *Inventory* journal. However, the group’s external activity overlapped substantially with the journal, understood to be ‘the central research spine from which visual works and performance /interventionist actions are produced’.<sup>22</sup> An understanding of these events and closely related activities is therefore necessary to comprehend fully the significance of the journal.

*Inventory* was therefore formed from a meeting of two groups of art students. The first met at Middlesex Polytechnic between 1986-1989 (formerly Hornsey College of Art and subsequently, after 1992, Middlesex University), the second group met at Chelsea College of Art on an Masters programme on Art and Theory in 1992. However it is this ‘second group’ (Scrivener, Abbott, Claydon) whom I shall henceforth consider primary to the editing and publishing of the journal.<sup>23</sup> Middlesex Polytechnic had an established history of student struggles around education, most canonically as part of an international wave of students and workers struggles in 1968 when the art department was known as Hornsey College of Art.<sup>24</sup> Writing about the 1968 Hornsey occupation

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> From Adam Scrivener, ‘Curriculum Vitae’, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> The Middlesex group (Norton, Neville, de Silva, Vanderpool and Miller) shall thenceforth be referred to as the second editorial group.

<sup>24</sup> Tom Nairn, ‘Hornsey’, *New Left Review*, Vol. 1 No.50, July-August 1968; Students and Staff of Hornsey College of Art. *The Hornsey Affair*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969; David Page, ‘Hornsey College of Art Uprising’, n.d., <http://www.alphabettthreat.co.uk/pasttense/hornsey.html>; Patricia Holland, *The Hornsey Film*, 1969, <https://archive.org/details/TheHornseyFilm> and Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: the Art School Revolution*, London: Frances Lincoln, 2008. Perhaps less well known, but certainly not coincidental, were the subsequent occupations and actions in 1988 and 1991 at Middlesex Polytechnic, struggles which were initiated through protests and occupations at the art department at Quicksilver Place. <https://libcom.org/history/documents-middlesex-university-occupation-1991> and <https://libcom.org/history/documents-middlesex-university-occupation-1988> [All Accessed 4 February 2019] These occupations book-ended the period of study of what I have designated *Inventory*’s second editorial group (Norton, Neville, Scrivener with Miller, Da Silva etc.). Both occupations addressed cuts to educational funding initiated in the Thatcher years. Each featured teach-ins, sit-ins, strikes, occupations, demonstrations, attempts to subvert the student union and the publication of zines, flyers, newsletters and posters. Scrivener and Norton were sceptical participants in the 1988 protests if not 1991, and in interview Scrivener specifically noted that he had been attracted to study at Hornsey/Middlesex because of its history of radical student struggle. Adam Scrivener in conversation with the author July, 2015 and Nick Norton email correspondence 15 April 2018.

within weeks of its eviction and cessation Tom Nairn framed the student protests of this period as ‘movements towards power, towards control of the process of mental production in which students are involved.’<sup>25</sup> As Nairn put it already in August 1968: struggles in education, in so-called ‘mental production’, ‘can also be seen as meaning that today’s “economy” is universal, and co-extensive with “society”’.<sup>26</sup> Protests at Hornsey and other art colleges in the late-’60s took the form of progressive struggle by both teachers and students for greater autonomy in education, specifically art education. One of the sparks which ignited this series of occupations were government education reforms which both standardised some art schools in line with universities and left others, in a second tier, outside of this new standard. Artists found themselves both forced into a relation of equivalence – ‘academic equality’ – with other forms of academic labour or left outside, or beneath it.<sup>27</sup> This was the beginning of a long process of intensifying forms of competition between art schools and universities themselves. Students at Hornsey, Guildford School of Art and other colleges ‘captured space’ in order to define their own activity.<sup>28</sup> Affirming ‘human autonomy’ and ‘spontaneity’ they struggled against the school board, the local authority and the department of education.<sup>29</sup> Realising their defeat at the hands of these bodies, protesters self-consciously conceived themselves as a ‘network’ without leaders completely opposed in aims and organisation to the molar (or state-oriented) powers they faced.<sup>30</sup> This brought into stark focus the arts’ contradictory status as subject to increasing efforts to bring them into relations of equivalence with other forms of labour, through professionalisation, and its maintenance as exceptional to the general division of labour in society. Artists found themselves on both sides of this equation and to a certain extent each perspective would continue to be reproduced at ever higher levels of contradiction throughout all aspects of the institutions of art.<sup>31</sup> It would therefore be an exaggeration to

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Hornsey’, op. cit., p.65. Indeed the New Left drew its strength and relevance from innovative interpretations of new social movements such as the student revolts of ’68 which tended to draw their resources and targets of attack from ‘outside the “economy” traditionally conceived’. Ibid., p.65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Holland, *The Hornsey Film*, 1969, <https://archive.org/details/TheHornseyFilm> (03:10-04:00) and William Coldstream, *First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education*. London: H.M. Stationery Off., 1960.

<sup>28</sup> For the development of analogies between student occupations, street protest and occupation as a tactic in expanded artistic practice cf. Andrew Wilson, ‘May ’68 in London’, Anna Harding (Ed.), *Artists in the City: SPACE in ’68 and Beyond*, Space Studios, 2018, pp.50-69, pp.52-53.

<sup>29</sup> *The Hornsey Film*, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> These contradictions are particularly evident within struggles by artists to organise themselves as workers. Cf. Ana Torok, ‘Joining a Struggle, Not a Mailing List’, *Artists in the City*, op. cit., pp.138-151 and Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.



understand these established art schools as ‘islands of libertarian communities’<sup>32</sup>, they were also islands of conservatism – of ‘anti-intellectual torpor’.<sup>33</sup> But, if we understand them as providing for something like ‘islands’ of relative autonomy if seized as such, then the generative nature of this situation for *Inventory*’s group practice, and the defensive nature of the struggles which followed ’68 come more clearly into focus. For *Inventory* the art college/university still held a trace of this imago but perhaps as lost (or rapidly disappearing) promise, rather than reality, yet I argue that this missed rendezvous with a free space of practice, research and knowledge production was then a motivating force for the journal itself to attain and manifest those qualities. These were sought not in an educational setting rapidly undergoing commodification, but instead a commodity (the magazine or journal) becoming decommodified.

As a second educational setting the Chelsea course was significant because it provided practising artists, who were often already in full or part-time employment and developing a ‘post-studio’ practice, with a context to develop their research and writing in a theoretical direction.<sup>34</sup> As well as the course providing the initial seed funding for the first issue of the journal<sup>35</sup>, some time after, a special issue of the journal, *Inventory* Vol.2 No.2, 1997, entitled ‘Collected’ was made to coincide with a multi-site exhibitions and conference project coordinated by their former tutor Neil Cummings. The journal issue published written contributions by contributors to the exhibition and conference.

In each context, at Middlesex, Chelsea and later SOAS (where Scrivener worked and attended seminars as a member of staff rather than as a student) those involved in *Inventory* understood themselves and their activity on a level field of activity with their teachers (and supposed superiors). They sought, often with encouragement, to blur the lines of individual and collective, as well as professional and amateur, production, to create an ensemble which integrated individual efforts into a not-yet identifiable organ of open-ended inquiry and research.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> R. Kuper quoted in ‘Hornsey’, op. cit., p.64.

<sup>33</sup> John Roberts, ‘Writerly Artists: Conceptual Art, *Bildung*, and the Intellectual Division of Labour’. *Rab-Rab: Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries into Art*, no. 01 (2014): pp.9-20, pp.16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Seminars were organised in the evenings specifically to cater to artists who worked during the day time. Neil Cummings interviewed by the author, 1 June 2018, transcript included in appendix.

<sup>35</sup> This in itself was controversial as Cumming’s interview attests. Neil Cummings interviewed by the author, 1 June 2018, transcript included in appendix.

<sup>36</sup> One of Scrivener, Abbott and Claydon’s former teachers, John Stezaker applied for research leave from Chelsea College by claiming he was undertaking a research project for *Inventory*. Adam Scrivener in conversation July, 2015. *Inventory* collaborated with their former teacher Neil Cummings on a special issue of the journal. Keiller was



Declaring in their final editorial, '[w]e all have, at various times, been unemployed, worked part-time/full-time jobs in different sectors.'<sup>37</sup> *Inventory* made many references to their own employment, unemployment and casualised work throughout their texts. These were sometimes ironic, humorous, defiant, and more rarely structural.<sup>38</sup> *Inventory*'s pictorial contribution to *Inventory* Vol.2 No.2, 1997, included a worksheet describing tasks to be carried out by library staff belonging to *Inventory* editor, Adam Scrivener.<sup>39</sup> In an archive of *Inventory* ephemera held at Chelsea School of Art the employment record of Adam Scrivener during the period in which *Inventory* was publishing is included, this indicates long bouts of unemployment, as well as an application for support of the journal. In their first exhibition editor Damian Abbott included documents pertaining to communications with the Housing Association he rented his flat from, his housing situation and the problem of damp he was experiencing.<sup>40</sup> The editors therefore self-consciously included references to their own conditions, mocking both the apolitical facticity of conceptual art's 'administrative aesthetics' and the delusions of the emerging entrepreneurial economy.<sup>41</sup>

In the statement I cited earlier in this introduction<sup>42</sup> *Inventory*'s editors invoke a strong theme of Karl Marx's writings identified by SS Prawer as: 'the urge to become more than just a professional man [...] to benefit humanity at large' and 'the yearning for fullness of development, for overcoming the limitations imposed by that division of labour without which no modern society can

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often in discussion with the group about a journal contribution and supported the journal through introducing potential contributors.

<sup>37</sup> *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.7.

<sup>38</sup> Adam Scrivener, 'Waste, Residues and Traces', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997 Collected 26 April to 21 June 1997, reflects on the political economy of waste and unproductive labour; Adam Scrivener, 'Human Sign', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, discusses the labour of workers who support mobile advertising hoardings in shopping districts such as Oxford Street; Victoria Halford, 'Contract', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.92-97 includes a job contract for cleaning work; Paul Claydon, 'Double Shafted', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, p.15, features the sign language sign for unemployed and was later made into a poster as an edition for Book Works; Damian Abbott, 'Waiting', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, p.94. *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, p.94 discusses the task of waiting, a partner to this piece is Paul Claydon, 'Smokers', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.93-94, which reflects on the ruse of smoking as a refusal of labour.

<sup>39</sup> *Inventory*, 'Inventories', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.84-87 includes *Inventory* editor, Adam Scrivener's, library duties tasksheet, p.87.

<sup>40</sup> *Inventory*, exhibition in library cabinets at School of Asian and Oriental Studies, London, 1994.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55 (Winter 1990): pp.105-143.

<sup>42</sup> *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh (Ed.), *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, op. cit., p.33.

function.<sup>43</sup> These were both ideal and practical aims, since the journal did not dissimulate from the conditions of its contributors actual employment, but also made plain its aspiration for the overcoming of existing divisions of intellectual and manual labour.

*Inventory* editor Paul Claydon worked as a bookseller from c.1994-2005, firstly for the Camberwell Bookshop, latterly for Marcus Campbell Art Books and most recently for König Books.<sup>44</sup> *Inventory* editor, Adam Scrivener, worked as a librarian from 1993-1999 and later as an editor for *Untitled* magazine. Close *Inventory* collaborator and contributor, Nick Norton presently works as a librarian at Leeds Arts University and still publishes on library science in this role, whilst also publishing a recent title with *Inventory*'s occasional publisher Book Works.<sup>45</sup> Several other regular *Inventory* contributors have also published stand alone or collaborative books with Book Works: Steve Beard & Victoria Halford, Neil Chapman. Beard and Norton also published with Proboscis a publisher run by *Inventory* pseudonymous contributor Giles Lazare AKA Giles Lane. Steve Beard was also a journalist publishing in *I:D*, *The Big Issue*, *Arena* and other magazines.<sup>46</sup> The third of *Inventory*'s primary editorial group, Damian Abbott, worked as a media technician at South Bank University and later became a Contributing Editor with *Mute* magazine.<sup>47</sup> Irregular *Inventory* contributors Howard Slater, Matthew Hyland and Josephine Berry were all regular contributors to *Mute*.<sup>48</sup> In each capacity *Inventory*'s editors drew on the technical resources where they worked<sup>49</sup> and also met a diverse pool of contributors drawn from the students, ex-students and staff at the institutions they

<sup>43</sup> 'Two related themes [...] will recur in Marx's later work. The first of these is the urge to become more than just a professional man, even if the profession chosen be that of a poet – the urge to work for others, to benefit humanity at large. This connects with a second theme, familiar to the age of Goethe, a theme given memorable expression in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* novels, in Schiller's *Aesthetic Education of Man*, and in Holderlin's *Hyperion*: the yearning for fullness of development, for overcoming the limitations imposed by that division of labour without which no modern society can function. S.S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> Adverts for which were respectively published in *Inventory* Vol.1 No.1, 1995, p.78 and *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, p.187.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Bataille and Benjamin met frequently at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris where Benjamin read and Bataille worked as a librarian. Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*, op. cit. p.188.

<sup>46</sup> An anthology of Beard's edited journalism was published in 1998 as Steve Beard, *Logic Bomb: Transmissions from the Edge of Style Culture*. London: New York : Serpent's Tail, 1998.

<sup>47</sup> *Mute* Vol.2 No.16, June 2010 contains an obituary for Damian Abbott.

<sup>48</sup> The latter were respectively contributing editor and editor.

<sup>49</sup> For example almost the entire run of the journal was printed 'under the counter' at a print shop inside SOAS. Subscribers' copies were also dispatched from the mail room at SOAS. Damian Abbott's job provided *Inventory* with video and audio equipment used to document events and make artworks. Camberwell Grove bookshop was often used as a meeting place and its book stock raided as a picture library for the journal. Adam Scrivener in conversation July, 2015 and August, 2016.

passed through.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, it is necessary to recognise the constraints and freedoms these forms of mobility engendered and were sought for, and how they might effect individual agency, institutionalisation, or group formation and autonomy. This approach self-consciously makes space for an understanding of the relations of production of these projects, the ‘communications circuits’ they pass through and are generative of – the literary or cultural production of texts, publications and *groups*.<sup>51</sup> *Inventory* themselves published inserts in other serial or one-off artist publications. Individuals editors and contributors to *Inventory* frequently published in other publications: *Mute*, *Infotainment*, *Datacide*, *Art Monthly*, *Everything Magazine*, *Casco editions*, *Wolverine*, *Crash Media*. The wider significances of *Inventory*’s editors’ and contributors’ conditions of employment and unemployment is attested to through the appendix and how this is intertwined with their writing is drawn out throughout later chapters of this study.

## Methodology

This proposition of the journal as a relay between the world and reporting upon it through writing self-consciously and self-reflexively in terms of the conditions of their own ability to do so drew analogies with ethnography and anthropology. Though the position of the group themselves was avowedly amateur, their understanding of the academic disciplines and intellectual movements they drew on was often astute, complex and original. The group behind the journal proposed a methodology: a ‘fierce sociology’, which was announced from the first issue and developed in later issues.<sup>52</sup> This methodology is examined through three axes in this thesis:

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<sup>50</sup> For example Michael Richardson, a Lecturer in Sociology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London from (at least) 1993 to (at least) 2001. His book on Bataille and his articles (those specifically listed below) were shared with *Inventory* founding member, Adam Scrivener, who was librarian at SOAS, c.1992-c.1999. It is conceivable that Michael Richardson, a Lecturer in Sociology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London from (at least) 1993 to (at least) 2001, played a substantial but not necessarily primary mediating role between members of *Inventory* and the heritage of Bataille’s surrealism and sociology. This was confirmed, in conversation with *Inventory* founder and editor Adam Scrivener in conversation in October 2015. He mentioned Michael Richardson working at SOAS, that he had been of interest to the group and had supported the journal. In specific connection with Bataille, for example, Richardson had given Scrivener a copy of his own translation of Michael Surya’s intellectual biography of Bataille as a gift.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Darnton, ‘What Is the History of Books?’ *Daedalus*, Vol.111, No. 3 (1982): pp.65-83, p.67.

<sup>52</sup> This conceptual methodology was primarily developed by the core editorial group through a series of editorials and collectively-authored essays or statements. However, a secondary group of close collaborators and regular contributors: Nick Norton, Simon Neville and Steve Beard, shall be understood to have developed this, both prior to

Firstly, the method is understood in relation to surrealist research and encounters between ethnographers and surrealists in Paris in the 1920s and later in the UK under the auspices of the Mass Observation project in the 1930s. Through the model of the journal as a publishing format and the writing published in it *Inventory* probed, in Benjaminian terms, the relations between life, writing and action, or experience and reflection upon it. Benjamin's 'anthropological materialism', a chapter heading he outlined in his unfinished *Passagenwerk*, provides then an enigma which I explore through *Inventory*'s heterodox reception of Benjamin's work and in their attempt to create a practice true to it.<sup>53</sup> Alongside this Benjaminian model of publishing and writing, *Inventory* drew upon other luminaries of the inter-war European avant-garde, notably Georges Bataille and the publications and groups which he initiated or otherwise associated (*Documents*, the Democratic Communist Circle, *La Critique Sociale*, *Contre-Attaque*, *Acephale*, *Acephale*, and *College de Sociologie*). In doing so the journal saw itself as continuing and extending the dissident surrealism and heterodox sociology Bataille developed through his writing, publishing activities and political organising efforts.

Secondly, the method and the anthropological leanings of the journal are discussed in relation to debates between art historians and ethnographers on surrealism and ethnography. Two key turning points of which are ethnographer James Clifford's essay on 'Ethnographic Surrealism' and art historian Hal Foster's essay, 'The Artist as Ethnographer'.<sup>54</sup> These are texts which offered a new framework for cultural theorists and global artists' appropriation of ethnographic material and

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the inception of the journal, in the case of Norton and Neville, and through individually authored contributions throughout the course of the journal's publishing run, in the case of Norton, Neville and Beard.

<sup>53</sup> This is the focus of an extended methodological exploration on *Inventory*'s relation to Benjamin and conversations on method between Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno in Chapter 3.

<sup>54</sup> Less well known, but nonetheless significant is also Joseph Kosuth, 'The Artist as Anthropologist', *The Fox*, No.1, 1975, pp.18-30, reprinted in *Art After Philosophy*, London and Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991, pp.107-128; James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.23, No.04, October 1981, pp 539-564, a second version was published in James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism' in *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1988, pp.117-150 and a version of Hal Foster's essay entitled 'The Artist as Ethnographer' was first published in the collection *The Traffic in Culture* and subsequently developed in the anthology of his own writing *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' in George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Eds.), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1995) pp.302-308 and Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, pp.171-203.

techniques after the 1960s. The debate has various facets and controversies depending on whether one approaches it from the perspective of art, art history, anthropology or literature.<sup>55</sup> In my reading, *Inventory* contribute substantially and originally to this debate through a radicalised reading of surrealist practice as research articulated in relation to critical theory and through claims to a knowledge-based practice which succeeded in producing and sustaining the collaboration of others and substantial research both within these fields and synthetically, trans-disciplinarily, across them.<sup>56</sup> According to philosopher of contemporary art, Peter Osborne, the paradigm of anthropology (of the artist as ethnographer or anthropologist) is a precondition of the global development of contemporary art after the 1960s and its intensified expansion after 1989.<sup>57</sup> In this model Osborne distinguishes between the way '[s]tructural anthropology provided an ontology for decolonization by maintaining multiple cultures on a single plane of significance', and the emergent, 'postcolonial condition', encountered through the intensified globalisation facilitated by the end of the cold war, which 'requires an anthropology of a more radically transcultural kind: a transnational and translational study of the cultural, focused on the production of new kinds of social subjects'.<sup>58</sup> This culture of transcultural anthropology is considered in its relation to Clifford and Foster's theories of art, surrealism and ethnography; large-scale exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* and an emergent consensus around the intertwining of art and globalisation.

Lastly then, the late ethnographic turn (of *Inventory* and others in the 1990s) is reconsidered in this thesis in relationship to the phenomena and conceptual framework of globalisation in this period and art's specific relations to that framework. *Inventory*'s own critical appropriation of ethnographic discourse and technique is understood in terms of a crisis of anthropology or ethnography and their own recuperation of surrealist currents which related closely to an earlier model of ethnography is shown to establish and sustain a marginal position of critical research and knowledge production in

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<sup>55</sup> Therefore a highly synthetic account by Steven Webster, which incorporates a close reading of a debate within critical theory (between Adorno and Benjamin), also the object of extensive commentary within *Inventory*, is also of significance. Steven Webster, 'The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography', in Marc Manganaro (Ed.), *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, pp.266-99.

<sup>56</sup> This debate, under which I have organised both the problem of the method of 'fierce sociology' and discussion of it in relation to Clifford's 'ethnographic surrealism' thesis, spans across Chapters 1, 2 and 3. This is because the method both tells us about the core concerns of the group and impacts on, and intervenes in, reception of Bataille and Benjamin and surrealism in general.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London & New York: Verso Books, 2013, pp.163-164.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.163.

global capitalist modernity.<sup>59</sup>

*Inventory*'s relation to this object of research is both local and world-historical. London circumscribed their immediate experience and base of operations as far as publishing and artistic practice was concerned. *Inventory* also emphasised the particular, the marginal, the vernacular and the subjective and this would seem to flow in the opposite direction to the quasi-transcendental and totalising modes of capitalism, globality and modernity. However, by focussing on the details of modern experience in a late-20th and early 21st century city, London, an emerging paragon of the 'world city' with its combination of connectivity, 'creativity', post-industrial services, finance and real estate *Inventory* produced a paradoxical but astute vehicle of registration of this objects' affects. *Inventory*'s participation in Century City, the first major exhibition following the opening of Tate Modern in London is understood to both validate *Inventory*'s critical relation to this emergent global city discourse and mark an important moment of the staging of London as a world city and its competition to become the financial capital of Europe. Therefore, after establishing *Inventory*'s methodological considerations, the specific formal and conceptual orientation of the journal, the thesis moves onto a consideration of *Inventory*'s contribution to urban studies of London and the study of the production of space, after Henri Lefebvre, in late-capitalism. This study of the journal's contribution to an account of practices and legacies of urbanism (housing, city planning, spatial practices and government) in London during the period of the journal's publication (1995-2005), of which the journal's original contribution stems from the application of its methodology which emphasises the production of space as a process the researcher is situated inside and capable of reflection and, to a certain degree, action upon.

The significance of *Inventory*'s method, of reinfusing critical theory with forms of mimesis whereby subject and object begin to find new mediations and relationships, begins, in a central chapter on the 'Journal as Form', to determine the presentation of my own study. Placing the glossary as a central component of the journal, which both looked back towards the aesthetico-political project of 'writing in common' across Romanticism, surrealism and critical theory, and forwards towards the new formats and possibilities for fragmentary and collaborative writing supported by the emergence of the internet, *Inventory* as *object* begins to assume agency as a collective organ of research and therefore becomes

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<sup>59</sup> Following Peter Osborne, 'global capitalist modernity' is understood as a unifying object, i.e. a mobile one which tends towards unity and is productive of 'actual abstractions' which dominate persons. Peter Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', *Radical Philosophy*, No.127, September/October 2004, pp.21-28, p.21.

*subject* and my own study begins to become coextensive with its form of inquiry.<sup>60</sup> Romantic philosophy provides a first formulation of the total and open-ended work which I argue *Inventory* comprised, it is not therefore an explicit point of identification for the editors and contributors behind the journal, but I believe it informed many of their direct models and in general provides a useful analytical framework through which to understand the unfolding of a work which subordinated individual authorship, identity, art, literature and science to an ensemble that aimed to arrive at something more than these categories.

My own approach to the diversity of the journal has been to first establish the categories the journal used as a material presentation. To probe where the publishing and writing conventions used derive from, and how from these conventions the journal sought to subvert, disrupt and interfere with the given organisation of its own presentation. This material and formal study then provides a number of categories and areas with which to explore; firstly the models for this form of heterodox publishing; then the relation of the journal as a material artefact and an intellectual forum; subsequently the significance of the journal as a form. To identify a method for the journal I first focussed on the Editorials as an area where the editors' made their primary methodological statements, then examined how and where these methodological claims are supported and developed by other texts across the journal run, finally how these methodological claims resonate with the specificities and significance of the journal as a whole. Since theory, action and immediate experience are articulated together through both the Editorials and throughout the journal I have not sought to separate them. Whilst maintaining a central focus on the journal I have drawn in relevant external interventions, actions, exhibitions and projects by *Inventory* where they illuminate the contents of the journal or the organisation and significance of the journal as a whole. The journal is then considered to be an organising apparatus for a range of activities and 'presentations'. To support this work I have drawn from art criticism, art history, book history, philosophy, critical theory, literary theory, literary criticism and journalism where it provide a context relevant to the journal and where it can best illuminate the difficult and unruly object the journal and its heterogeneous contributions represents. I have made interviews with one *Inventory* editor, one *Inventory* contributor (close collaborator and member of the second editorial group) and one teacher, contributor and collaborator of the core editorial group. As well as the two key institutional archival collections I have solicited and explored additional material directly from the

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<sup>60</sup> "The art of writing in common", said Novalis, "is a curious symptom that is the presentiment of great progress in literature." Novalis quoted in Denis Hollier (Ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.xiv.



personal collections of these interview subjects and other *Inventory* contributors.<sup>61</sup> In deciding what theoretical resources are relevant to *Inventory* I have firstly drawn from the journal itself, secondly drawing on my own very wide ranging readings in critical theory adjacent to these. I have throughout questioned critically the claims made within the journal against those supported by authoritative academic sources, however, in areas where there has, as yet been little academic exploration, I have depended on generating a consensus on events and ideas by sampling the opinions of *Inventory*'s peers and like-minded publications. Moreover as much as the journal's wideranging intellectual engagements I have also followed my own, where I felt these could illuminate the journal and its interpretation. In order to conceptualise a challenging object for which no existing specialist discipline exists I have drawn from adjacent fields (philosophy of language, periodical studies, book history, aesthetic theory, zine studies, intellectual history) to establish a syncretic analysis appropriate to understanding publishing as an *activity* productive of, in this case, a highly syncretic object.

## Research Questions

My primary research questions are these: How did the journal, *Inventory*, and the art group, Inventory transform practices of 'ethnographic surrealism' – the legacy of the *Documents* branch of surrealism – into their own distinctive practice: a fierce sociology? What were the preconditions for this practice and how did changing conditions effect it? What were the limits, artistic or otherwise, tested by the group and its expanded milieu of contributors? What was the significance of the journal or magazine form for the group's practice. And what is the significance of an artist-run printed journal, especially during a period marked by the ascendancy of the digital, for the historicisation of culture in the 1990s and 2000s? How did the group theorise and shape the urban environment of London upon which their practice was predicated and to which it responded? What is the journal considered as a complete or incomplete work? What is *Inventory* as literature, theory, writing or art?

Drawing from these questions the outcomes I hope to contribute are: to develop new insights into the agency of printed matter in artistic and cultural practice in the 1990s and 2000s; to contribute to cultural and political debates on 'autonomy' or 'sovereignty' as a theme of late-20th and early 21st century society; to survey and further publicise original practices of print publication and distribution in the 1990s and 2000s in the UK; to consider the relationship between printed matter and other media

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<sup>61</sup> Primarily the personal collections of Adam Scrivener, Nick Norton, Max Reeves and Howard Slater.



of publication in fine art and cultural practice; to critically re-evaluate the role of publishing, artists writing and theory in relation to fine art practice; to consider the relationship of oppositional cultures to institutions during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in the UK.

## Approach and Existing Literature

*Inventory*'s practice could be meaningfully considered in its entirety as an art practice which incorporated publishing among other material practices. However, for the purposes of this study I have chosen to foreground the journal, making an argument for its importance as an example of the vivacity and criticality of the self-publishing scene operating in London during this period and to stress the significance of a journal published by artists as able to encompass interests beyond those pertaining solely to art. What made it an 'experimental' journal shall be evaluated in terms of the development of the journal's methodological approach and theoretical innovations, its proximity to historical precursors in the avant-garde tradition and through comparison to contemporary publications on whose behalf related claims have been made. The study surveys and develops approaches to print and other media by focussing primarily on one object of study, the journal *Inventory* and associated activities of the editorial and artistic group who produced it.

Importantly, the journal must be considered as a whole, the product of the sum of its contributions. This shall involve evaluating its individual contributions on their merits and distinctions as well as developing methods for characterising and evaluating the whole presentation of each issue as well as the whole run of issues as a complete or incomplete *work*. The journal's overall approach, editorial development, access to contributors and internal discussions were strongly shaped by those who participated in it beyond the formality of the initial editorial group.

Deliberate publication implies a perceived community; a community of readers, of contributors, and an exchange between the two.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, not only does the contribution of the individual submissions and the other projects of the contributors need to be taken into account, but also the organising function of the journal itself, as a vehicle of a specific form of community. This community *in potentia* – 'as an ongoing process

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<sup>62</sup> Damian Abbott (*Inventory*), 'Inventory', Maria Fusco, and Ian Hunt (Eds.), *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*, London: Bookworks, 2004, p.183.

whose form we can only guess at' – is enshrined in the title chosen for this study, since *Paper Assembly* refers both to the act of construction out of paper, writing, the collection of contributions and the potential for calling upon, addressing, assembling and listening to a community that publishing can embody.<sup>63</sup> As the quotations above imply, this 'community' was both the goal and the subject of reflection in the journal and in related publications, in dialogue with readers and contributors. The complex and subtle dialogue on the potential for community is established in the context of a wave of communitarianism in the 1990s which responded to the 'excessive individualism', which developed apace throughout the entire century but has come to be seen as, particularly characteristic of the late-20th century.<sup>64</sup> Whilst *Inventory* can be conceived as participating in this generic tendency towards communitarianism they also played a critical role in disputing superficial forms of belonging, picking apart the dominant configurations of subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity operating in human societies and by specifying and seeking to embody in practice richer forms which interrogated and challenged capitalist social synthesis.<sup>65</sup>

The primary source for my study will be the complete journal run of *Inventory* journal 1995-2005. Contextualising and supporting the study of *Inventory* journal will be the study of other publications in which they published and limited comparative studies of associated publications operating at the time and circulating in similar contexts. A close study of Info Centre will establish it as a crucial context for the dissemination and socialisation of the journal, place of exhibition of the group's associated work and hub of debate and cultural exchange. Supporting literature will be drawn by sampling relevant debates and tendencies within the multitude of small cultural and political publications in circulation at the time, as well as relevant precursors in conceptual and post-conceptual practices which established printed matter as a critical artistic medium. Theoretical resources are primarily drawn from the theoretical debates occurring in the journal (Simmel, Nietzsche, Bataille, Caillois, Mauss, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Maffesoli, Deleuze & Guattari) and secondarily from thinkers who help me critically develop and evaluate *Inventory's*

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<sup>63</sup> *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

<sup>64</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communitarianism#Communitarian\\_philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communitarianism#Communitarian_philosophy) [Accessed 17 February, 2017]

<sup>65</sup> In doing so *Inventory* responded, implicitly rather than explicitly, to formulations of community 'from a postcolonial perspective' such as the following by Homi Bhabha, 'The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive "liberal" sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. The time for "assimilating" minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective'. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London; New York: Routledge, (1994) 2005, p.251.

explorations of these thinkers works and themes or the broader current of surrealism, ethnography or materialism which they saw themselves as critical interlocutors with (Buck-Morss, Jamin, Caygill, Cunningham, Osborne, Michelson, Martin, Noys, Kendall, Leslie, Tiedmann, Cassirer, Webster, Weingrad). My own method, specified above, seeks to explore the complete run of *Inventory* as an object of research, study, reading and as the material trace of a field of activity. However, the occasions in which the experience of reading necessarily elicits behaviour by which the object may begin to operate more like a subject – that is, where I, or other readers or perceiving agents, am acted upon by the object of research; where the sensate qualities of the object impact on my perception and experience and where ‘sensuous human activity’ can be conceptualised as ‘objective activity’, that is the role of active processes and subjects in constituting objectivity – shall be integrated into the study.<sup>66</sup>

Very little detailed critical work has been carried out directly on *Inventory*. What exists are primarily short reviews or news items about the inception of the first issues.<sup>67</sup> Longer reviews deal primarily with exhibitions or art projects by the group and only occasionally with the art practice and journal together.<sup>68</sup> More common are small features about the journal in surveys of artists’ publishing and book arts<sup>69</sup>, or in mixed media surveys of London’s creative scene and subculture.<sup>70</sup> Neil Chapman’s essay in *Foreign Bodies*, is one small exception, grouping and surveying tendencies within a survey of group practices in London in the late-1990s he foregrounds *Inventory*’s collective nature and the distance it maintained between simple identification between

<sup>66</sup> Here I am quoting formulations from ‘Thesis One’ in Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ in *The German Ideology*, C. J. Arthur (Ed.), London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1982, pp.121-123, p.121. I am grateful for Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia insightful commentary on this text, particularly his conclusion, following Marx, that ‘if neither object nor subject alone, but rather their interrelation is responsible for the constitution of objectivity, and this interrelation is not fixed [...] grasping the specific configuration of the subject-object relation becomes the aim of theoretical enquiry and critique.’ Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia, ‘Materialism and Critique: On Marx and Brassier’, Presented at the SEP-FEP conference, Regent’s University London, August 2016, (quotation, p.7).

<sup>67</sup> Alistair Bonnet, ‘Inventory (Review of Inventory Vol.1 No.1 and Vol.1 No.2)’. *Transgressions: Journal for Urban Exploration* Vol.1, no. 2/3 (1996): Np.

<sup>68</sup> J.J. Charlesworth, ‘Inventory: “Requiem for the Empty Quarter” The Approach, 31st January – 3rd March 2002’. *Art Monthly*, No.254 (March 2002), available <http://www.jjcharlesworth.com/reviews/inventory2.htm> and Pieroni, Paul. ‘Inventory Rob Tufnell, London, UK Issue , September 2014’. *Frieze*, No.165, September 2014, available <http://frieze.com/issue/review/inventory/>

<sup>69</sup> *Indent*, op. cit. and *Put About*, op. cit.

<sup>70</sup> Gregor Muir (Ed.), ‘A Journey Through London Subculture 1980s to Now’, Institute of Contemporary Arts, c 2013, available, <https://www.chisenhale.org.uk%2Fabout%2Fimages%2FICA-Brochure-lowres.pdf> [Accessed 3 July, 2017] and Iwona Blazwick, ‘Century City’, in Iwona Blazwick (Ed.), *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*. London: Tate Publishing, 2001, pp.8-15.

the journal and the world of art.<sup>71</sup>

Whilst substantial literature covers British Art in this period, particularly the phenomenon of so-called YBAs (Young British Artists), this has tended to focus on gallery-based practices and has been widely criticised for the spectacular nature of the practices discussed and the mode of discussion. Some notable exceptions have attempted to establish a more critical framework and direct attention towards expanded models of practice in the same period.<sup>72</sup> Apart from Chapman (2001) few of these specifically focus on *Inventory* or even proximate positions taken by other practices, but their attention to emerging new conditions of production, related practices and modes of operation such as those of the art group and publishing venture *Bank* and the lesser known *Break/Flow*, will be relevant to my study.

Contextually significant for my study will be the analysis put forward by Anthony Davies and Simon Ford of the general conditions for the institutions of art in this period – the ‘surge to merge’ culture and finance driven by London’s ascension as the centre of European Finance during the period.<sup>73</sup> A notable attempt to retrospectively historicise the period within the context of recession and financial growth of cities, *Century City* at the Tate Modern, included significant work by *Inventory* and displayed copies of the journals *Inventory* and *Infopool* in a reading room.<sup>74</sup>

This study offers a working periodisation of the period in which *Inventory* journal was published. This remains primarily contained within the dates covering the beginning and end of the journal (1995–2005), but the historicisation of this period also considers the historical consequences which followed

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<sup>71</sup> Neil Chapman, ‘Shut Up and Listen: Collaboration In Contemporary Visual Art Neil’. In *Foreign Bodies*, London: Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, 2001, pp.21-32.

<sup>72</sup> Simon Ford, ‘Myth Making’, *Art Monthly*, No.194, March 1996, pp.3-9 and, Duncan Mccorquodale, Naomi Siderfin and Julian Stallabrass (Eds.), *Occupational Hazard, Critical Writing On Recent British Art*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998.

<sup>73</sup> Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, ‘Art Capital’, *Infopool*, 1998, available <http://infopool.antipool.org/artcap.htm> [Accessed 20 March, 2019] and Anthony Davies, ‘The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy’. *Copenhagen Free University*, Copenhagen Free University, (stapled pamphlet), No.3, 29 September 2001), pp.1-20.

<sup>74</sup> *Century City*, op. cit. The contestation of this inclusion, publicised in ‘Operation Re-Appropriation’ by *Infopool*, provides an important example of the ways such projects sought to defend their own independence against absorption by larger institutions. *Inventory*’s own public disputes with the Royal Academy and Courtauld Institute of Art (2002 and 2003) are to be understood as part of this tendency of vocal antagonism towards cultural institutions. *Inventory*’s critique of Nicholas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics enables us to understand the journal as a forum for the criticism of contemporary art, art theory and their complicity with capitalist form. *Inventory*, ‘On Art, Politics and Relational Aesthetics’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.166-181.

2005. The fact that *Inventory*'s editors continued to exhibit sporadically under the group moniker Inventory and recently published a monograph with Book Works, *The Counsel of Spent* (2018), shall be considered as relevant but external to the significance and key themes of the journal.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Inventory, *The Counsel of Spent*, London: Bookworks, 2018.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Surveying Inventory**

### **Journal: *A Rich Midden***

## Table of Contents

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INVENT



LOOSING

FINDING

COLLECTING

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O R Y :

Image: *Inventory* cover mock-up, c.1994. May Day Rooms Archive, London



# Inventory Journal

*Inventory* is a journal established in 1995 as ‘a collective enterprise by a group of writers, artists and theorists’ by Damian Abbott, Paul Claydon and Adam Scrivener, who met studying together on a Masters programme at Chelsea College of Art in 1991.<sup>1</sup> The journal ran for 15 consecutive issues from 1995 to 2005.<sup>2</sup> The journal began as a proposal for a college project and funding was obtained from Chelsea College in 1992 by members of the core editorial group.<sup>3</sup> A second group of artists and writers (Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Toni De Zilva, James Vanderpool and Jake Miller<sup>4</sup>) with whom Scrivener studied with at Middlesex University in the late 1980s were supporters of, contributors to, and informed this project in multiple capacities.<sup>5</sup> This second group collectively produced a text, ‘The Profound Purchase’ (1989-1990), made a performative reading of this text recorded on video but subsequently lost and distributed the text close to the time of their Middlesex graduation exhibition. The group who made this subsequently discussed a possible common project, including ideas for a journal.<sup>6</sup> Toni deSilva contributed only an enigmatic note to the journal’s first issue while Simon Neville and Nick Norton were subsequently persistent contributors to the journal.

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- 1 Quotation from ‘Do You Feel Crushed’, a flyer advertising subscription to the journal (May Day Rooms collection, c.1995). The entire run of the journal consists of thirteen single issues and one double Tenth anniversary issue amounting to a total of 14 printed items. Adam Scrivener, Damian Abbot and Paul Claydon were the main editors throughout the life of the journal and are understood as the ‘core editorial group’ for the purposes of this study. However, Damian Abbot, Paul Claydon, Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Kathrynne Holmes, and Gautier Deblonde are all mentioned as founding members of the group in Adam Scrivener, ‘Curriculum Vitae’, <http://www.wildcapital.net/> [Accessed 5/02/18]. Furthermore my interviews indicate that Simon Neville and Nick Norton justifiably belong to a second founding group who are discussed further above. Gautier Deblonde and Kathrynne Holmes were only ever infrequent contributors to the journal.
  - 2 On commencement of my study the journal had lapsed for almost 10 years. However two core members of the continue exhibiting and writing under the name *Inventory*, and in 2014 this group (Paul Claydon and Adam Scrivener) were commissioned in c.2015 to publish a book by arts organisation Bookworks. The book, titled *The Council of Spent*, was published in 2018.
  - 3 The initial funding was controversial and challenged by the College since the group did not deliver a college magazine, but rather their own vehicle. Adam Scrivener in conversation with the author, 2016, Cf. Appendices: An Interview with Neil Cummings for further discussion of this incident.
  - 4 Jake Miller is not known to have contributed to the journal, but he supported the group as the Director of the Approach Gallery, representing and promoting *Inventory*’s work internationally, and providing exhibition space for 3 solo exhibitions: *Re: Presentations of Everyday Life* (2004) *Requiem For The Empty Quarter* (2002) and *Twenty Thousand Streets Under The Sky* (1999/2000) and a group exhibition *A to Z* (1998). Miller also represented photographic conceptual artist John Stezaker, who taught Middlesex and later became a friend and supporter of the journal.
  - 5 ‘The Profound Purchase, whatever its merits or faults, was an experimental attempt by us to achieve some sort of collective theorising, and therefore it is significant and important.’ Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, 31/072016. Adam Scrivener, in conversation with the author July, 2017, claims the idea for ‘a project’ was frequently discussed amongst this group of Middlesex University fine Art graduates, the idea for a journal came up in discussion only once and did not develop further until the later formation at Chelsea College. During the journal’s existence Nick Norton frequently offered editorial and conceptual advice via correspondence in an informal capacity.
  - 6 Adam Scrivener in conversation July, 2015 and August, 2016 and 2017.

Both were in frequent communication with Scrivener, and thereby informed its key concerns, they are therefore treated as a secondary editorial group.<sup>7</sup> The core editorial group began planning the journal and organised exhibitions together, in collaboration with this secondary group, at the School of Oriental and African Studies and Museum of Mankind in 1994. The first issue of the journal was published in 1995. From this point on, *Inventory* developed as the name for a journal; the editorial collective working on the eponymous journal; and an art group who coordinated the journal and made performances, exhibitions, public art works, posters and stickers. This study focusses primarily on *Inventory* journal. However, the group's external activity overlapped substantially with the journal, understood to be 'the central research spine from which visual works and performance or interventionist actions are produced'.<sup>8</sup> Therefore an understanding of some of these events and closely related activities is necessary to comprehend fully the significance of the journal and the ongoing development of internal and external discussions and manifestations. In the chapter title I have drawn upon *Inventory*'s self-description as a 'rich midden' to suggest there is something appropriately archaeological to my initial approach by which the journal is presented as found.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter establishes the journal, its form, organisation, frequency and some basic themes, and outlines some examples of the performance and exhibition projects which overlapped with the journal itself as the central hub within a field of interrelated activities.

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7 'There would be long conversations, often not directly about journal content although, really, everything was focussed through or toward this entity known as *Inventory*.' Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, 31/072016.

8 From Adam Scrivener, 'Curriculum Vitae', op. cit.

9 The term 'rich midden' is invoked in an undated press flyer for the launch of *Inventory* Vol.2 No.1 1997, 'Inventory is a "rich midden"; a violent aberration which rejects cybernetic utopianism and the mangy dog of joyless nihilism alike. Actively affirm chance! Forward into the abyss laughing!' Chelsea College of Art Archives, n.p.. 'A midden (also kitchen midden or shell heap; from early Scandinavian; Norwegian: mødding, Danish: mødding, Swedish regional: mödding)[1] is an old dump for domestic waste [2] which may consist of animal bone, human excrement, botanical material, vermin, shells, sherds, lithics (especially debitage), and other artifacts and ecofacts associated with past human occupation. The word is of Scandinavian via Middle English derivation, but is used by archaeologists worldwide to describe any kind of feature containing waste products relating to day-to-day human life. They may be convenient, single-use pits created by nomadic groups or long-term, designated dumps used by sedentary communities that accumulate over several generations.' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midden>

**inventory** /'ɪnv(ə)nt(ə)ri/ ■ **n.** (pl. **inventories**) a complete list of items such as goods in stock or the contents of a building. ► chiefly N. Amer. a quantity of goods in stock. ► (in accounting) the entire stock of a business, including materials and finished product. ■ **v.** (**inventories, inventorying, inventoried**) make an inventory of.

– **ORIGIN** ME: from med. L. *inventorium*, alt. of late L. *inventarium*, lit. 'a list of what is found', from L. *invenire* 'come upon'.

Image: 'Inventory' definition in the Oxford Dictionary, (2004)

## Title and Strapline

*inventarium*, lit. ‘a list of what is found’, from L. *invenire* ‘come upon’.<sup>10</sup>

Appropriately for a journal which sought to become an ‘interdisciplinary space’ and ‘a central research spine from which [other] actions are produced’ the journal’s title provided a flexible umbrella open to several interpretations.<sup>11</sup> *Inventory* may mean a ‘list of items such as *goods*’; ‘the contents of a building’; ‘a quantity of *goods* in *stock*’ and ‘the entire stock of a business including *materials* and finished *product*.’<sup>12</sup> In a most basic sense, the making of an inventory involves the translation of things into words. The history of magazines in relation to the itemisation and presentation of goods already provided *Inventory* with the premise for interpreting a journal or magazine as a temporary display and intermittent collection, ‘a container for an eclectic array of contents’.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, ‘inventory’ also has a positive resonance with the word ‘magazine’, which is derived from the Arabic word *makhāzin* – storehouse, granary, cellar.<sup>14</sup> This etymology, of inventory and magazine also establishes the commodity as central to the function of the store and its written record. Both words, ‘inventory’ and ‘magazine’, have close associations with ‘goods’, or ‘stock’ and therefore, in the most general sense, the commodity – things or materials of value. In relation to the history of modernism the military associations of both words shall also become relevant.<sup>15</sup> ‘Inventory’ is both a verb, *to inventory*, and a noun, *inventory*. As a title it may refer to a list of contents; the contents themselves; the activity of collecting and listing the contents or as an imperative: ‘you must inventory’. This is further emphasised by the strapline: ‘Finding Losing Collecting’; three verbs displayed justified below the title on both the cover and interior table of contents. These each specify *Inventory* as activity, but all have passive and active connotations. One finds or loses, potentially, ‘without intent’ or interest. Whilst the act of collecting

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10 Catherine Soanes & Angus Stevenson (Eds.), *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

11 Adam Scrivener ‘Curriculum Vitae’, op. cit., pp.1-2.

12 Ibid. (author’s emphasis).

13 Gwen Allen, ‘Introduction’, Gwen Allen (Ed.), *The Magazine*. London; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery: The MIT Press, 2016.

14 The French absorption of this term contributed distinctly military meanings to it, as in: ‘1: a storehouse or warehouse especially for military supplies 2: a place for keeping explosives in a fort or ship 3: a publication containing different pieces (as stories, articles, or poems) and issued at regular intervals (as weekly or monthly) 4: a supply chamber: as a: a container in a gun for holding cartridges b: a container for film on a camera or motion-picture projector.’ <http://www.wordcentral.com/cgi-bin/student?magazine>

15 ‘The handicraft period bequeathed to us the great inventions of the compass, gunpowder, type-printing and the automatic clock.’ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1, (trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach) London: Penguin, 1990.

may be deliberate, matter also collects itself into aggregations of larger magnitude without necessary human intervention. Is it about, or does it consists in, finding, losing, collecting? The three seem to form a circle of activity. In this sense the strapline further specifies but also opens to a wider field of meaning the title word which retains both a passive or neutral sense, as in an inventory as an impartial and only quantitative list, *and* an active meaning as in the verb: ‘to make an inventory of’, to be ‘inventorying’; to ‘find, discover, ascertain’.<sup>16</sup> The action of ‘mak[ing] a list or catalogue’ also implies the sale or valuation of the items listed. However, inventorising is an action apart from, or in advance of, valuation. It is therefore initially self-consciously quantitative and not qualitative, but forms the basis for further analyses to permit finer grained forms of measure.

*Inventory*, as a title, implies the translation of things as words – therefore as a vehicle of research, the journal would be interested in the relationships between things and words – and the enumeration (finding, listing, counting, collecting) of forms. This has a Benjaminian inspiration in the use of the term ‘inventory’ in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Moscow Diary’, wherein ‘the inventory of the streets is inexhaustible’.<sup>17</sup> The title’s meanings resonate with and point us towards the Glossary section, as a list of words or ‘a list of what is found’; the Found Texts as ‘a list of what is found’ or ‘come upon’ and in general the articulation of complex relations between content, category and classification which this description of the journal’s form explores. Forms here can be understood to refer to the characteristics of a thing (shape, colour, volume etc.), but since words provide form for things, an investigation of forms shall be understood to imply study of things-in-themselves and the words that are generated to describe and enumerate them. Things as ‘found’ also implies attention to the context they were found in as much as the placement in relation to other things in a list or other system of classification. ‘*Inventory*’ expresses the aggregate of this enumeration and translation, the list as a totality or constellation of fragments the title is ‘a microcosm of the work.’<sup>18</sup> ‘*Inventory*’ also expresses this enumeration as an ongoing activity, necessarily always incomplete and temporary.

The study of the relationship of words and things can be understood to foreground ‘the central

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Moscow Diary’, *October*, Vol.35, Winter, 1985, pp.9-135, p.58, quoted in *Inventory*, ‘For a Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995. Benjamin’s Moscow Diary is also the subject of significant reflection in terms of wealth, equivalence and value in an essay on money by Esther Leslie, ‘Notes on Notes’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2 2001, 28–47.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, op. cit., p.125.

importance of language as the process through which the subject is formed'.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, '[t]he subject is thus seen as constituted by language and it appropriates the world through language.'<sup>20</sup> *Inventory*'s research into the relationship of words and things is therefore also an inquiry into subject formation. An early hand-drawn mock-up cover displays the strapline: 'finding, losing, collecting' sandwiched between the title split into two words: 'Invent [...] ory' with a single human eye in the centre of the cover. This cover emphasises invention and an actively curious or mysterious subject as central to these actions. We might even speculate on it as the appearance of an 'invisible, disembodied Mind', the 'I', which has long determined the relationship between writing and thinking, or a hovering 'disembodied, supernatural agency', a 'we', a spectral collective subject yet to emerge.<sup>21</sup> In either case this early implication that language implies a body and a subject will remain a central theme for all *Inventory* was to encompass.

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19 Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire*. London; Melbourne; Sydney; Auckland; Johannesburg: Hutchinson, 1985, p.48.

20 Ibid.

21 Brian Rotman, *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p.13.



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# INVENTORY

Losing

Finding

Collecting

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Vol.1 No.1 1995

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For a sociology.....	Inventory
Three essays on the task of mourning.....	Paul Claydon
Hall of mirrors.....	Damian Abbott
Elephant.....	Adam Scrivener
Certain events.....	a found text
The floating island.....	Nick Norton
Some notes concerning easy listening.....	Adam Scrivener
Categories.....	Tony deSilva

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Image: Cover of *Inventory*, Vol.1, No.1, 1995.

## Structure of the Journal

Magazines can be divided into their constituent parts. *Inventory* is relatively simple in structure, but because this belies a complex field of parts and constellation of interests, I will analyse the journal as a container and the material it contained to first establish the basic structure of the journal before eventually complexifying this account to arrive at *Inventory*'s instantiation of the journal as a 'self-differing medium'.<sup>22</sup> Two categories of content are indicated in the table of contents: essays and glossary entries. The 'Notes to contributors' specifies the 'wish to make *Inventory* a space for a theory/practice that conjoins and conflicts writing and image, found and made, the lost and the discovered'.<sup>23</sup> There were no interviews, reviews, features or letters sections. The journal did not accept 'review articles' and advocated 'developing the essay as a form'. Only a few simple elements separated or distinguished contributions from each other and organised the contents, outside of these elements most content was presented within a relatively flat organisational structure. Though the Table of Contents effectively designates only two content distinctions, in order to convey the complexity of the journal and interaction across these two initial categories I have generated further categories describing both content and formal publishing categories, which I will first treat in subheaded sections below. These are the cover, table of contents, editorials, essays, glossary, found texts and notes to contributors. 'Found texts' are found both subsumed under the essays section and less frequently, in the Glossary section. They are only distinguished from the other contributions through their authoring as 'Found text', this is not therefore understood as a content distinction, nonetheless the significance of the slippage between these two main sections is considered below. An appendix addresses what I have designated as categories of writing in *Inventory*, which facilitates later development of the journal's significance, but this chapter begins with what is endogenous to the journal from its outwards physical appearance before bringing that into relation to a selection of key projects which establish a rapport between external (often public) interventions and the journal itself.

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22 This is a term borrowed from American art critic Rosalind Krauss by Nicholas Thoburn and applied to small publishing ventures to great effect in his recent book on 'radical publishing'. Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016, pp.9-13.

23 'Notes to contributors' *Inventory*, No.1, Vol.1, 1995, (inside back cover) and subsequent issues.



## Journal Format

The journal maintained a precise and consistent physical format throughout its 10 years of existence. The journal format is rectangular, measuring 207mm (height) by 143mm (width), taller and wider than a standard paperback, but compact by the standards of most periodicals, printed in black and white interior with a beige card cover and coloured title. The only colour element used in the journal was the differently coloured title on the front cover, the journal title was generally printed in dark blue-grey ink, occasionally it was printed in forest green, magenta or post-box red. The journal was printed using an in-house photostat printer based at SOAS University of London. Each issue was typeset in situ with editors working alongside the printer and photographic material was supplied as original photographs, from newspapers or photocopies. Though the printer appears to have remained the same throughout the entire run of the journal, with the exception of the final issue, very slight variations of font size, spacing, card quality or weight can be detected throughout the series. These are especially noticeable due to the serial and near-identical nature of the basic design and layout. Each issue generally ran to between 80-130 pages with the first issue being the shortest and the final double issue still being less than 200 pages. The basic page format consisted of single columns of text with bold, centred and capitalised titles and bold sub-headings if a contribution required them. Each contribution generally began on the right facing page, and, even in the case of numerous experimental and unorthodox essay formats, this was mostly adhered to.

## Jackdaw



### Lost soul

CERTAIN events and mishaps make me polish my report. During my stay in the UK I've never requested grants. I was so disgusted that Trust House Forte hotels were in a bad condition. I then started restoring Southampton Row, and all the hotels in central London. I did not live in any of them apart from the Grand which has since had about two names. Then I was in the red light district where I restored restaurants. Certain elements of foreign origin told me they were leaving the country and that I should manage my own business... Then after a few weeks,

the Chinese invaded the premises. I did nothing as I am all alone. I done most of Underwoods chemists. I never took a penny from none of the businesses... I went to 166 High Holborn St and requested to see all the directors and all I ever see is pranksters and prostitutes who sexualise in front of my presence... I went to the medical chambers and the state they were in was appalling. I renovated all the chambers in central London. They then had Asiatic quacks in them. I did report of this misconduct of practice. Persons using practitioners names in absentia. I did have a hectic time and plenty of problems, chasing these dangerous fanatics. The cause of the chaos was foreign nationals bringing properties and trying to hand it to me. I refused then and still refuse as I am no tax evader. And was a target from their agents and detectives. I was being monitored and followed wherever I go there was at least 60 serious attempts on my life until they realised I had nothing to with anyone in the UK. I could not understand what they were

trying to achieve. I am still jittery and scared as the plot to kill me is still existing. I have never went abroad or have any liaisons with one person female or male. Women and men take properties from all over the universe in my name. Burning my bridges. People claiming to be my father, yet he died 14 years ago. I have never even seen my late mother's photograph. Yet there is callous animals that publish my birth, yet they don't even talk to me person to person, they let everyone give me headaches from morning to morning. I have not authorised anyone person to represent me in any capacity. Therefore the losses that are incurred are their responsibility. I want a full audit and all tax returns from all my businesses.

*From a text found in a telephone box in central London in the spring of 1990, and published in Inventory. The text concludes with a lengthy list of corporate debtors. Inventory is a new journal of "losing, finding, collecting" which sees itself as an "anti-hierarchical catalogue, a critical compendium, an interdisciplin-*

*ary space from which to put forward a paradoxical philosophy which aims to represent a sociology embracing the marginal and the everyday, the theoretical and the base".*

The Guardian June 28th 1995

INVENTORY will now present an exhibition of new 'evidence': visual and textual material collected from a variety of sources; found, gathered, given and sought, etc.,

A party will be held on Thursday August 10th from 6 - 9pm

workfortheyetodo  
51 Hanbury Street, London E1  
August 10th - September 10th 1995

Thursday - Saturday 11-6pm  
and by appointment

Image: Flyer for *Inventory* exhibition at workfortheyetodo, 10 August - 10 September, 1995

## Frequency and Distribution

The journal's first issue announced: 'Inventory is produced at irregular intervals with no more than three issues appearing in one year.'<sup>24</sup> Between 1995 and 2005 14 editions were published, the final comprising a double issue. Intervals between issues were truly *irregular* in the sense that what initially became a pattern was quickly broken again: in 1995 one issue, 1996 two, 1997 three, then between 1998-2003 *Inventory* was published once per year, until, after a two year gap, a final double issue or two issues combined into one binding was published in 2005. Only once, in 1997, were three issues ever published within the course of a year. Each issue of the journal was generally presented at a launch event. These were often cultural events held in unconventional venues, accompanied by original performances, readings, multimedia installations, live music or dj sets. The journal was distributed through direct sales at these events, through subscriptions fulfilled by post and through a distribution deal with Central books. The journal was available in a number of small bookshops and arts venues throughout London, the UK and, to a limited extent, Europe. Some of these stockists, such as Info Centre and Workfortheeyetodo, were hybrid discussion and exhibition spaces as well as book vendors. A number of small press fairs, most notably the annual Anarchist Book Fair and Publish and Be Damned, also provided an outlet for sales and a context where *Inventory* would encounter other small publishers, readers of small press publications and potential contributors. Further distributive mechanisms for information about the journal and extension of its content beyond the pages of the journal were the art works and texts published in other publications: magazines, journals, exhibition catalogues; flyers, posters and press releases promoting the journal or diffusing its content; material from the journal represented or referenced in artworks, performances or radio broadcasts and talks, performances, lectures and seminars given by the group at educational or art institutions. For a small group with only marginal institutional support, organising every aspect of the journal's conception, commissioning, editing, proofreading, design, layout, launch, promotion and distribution, consistently producing was an independent achievement.<sup>25</sup>

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24 From the 'Colophon' located inside front cover *Inventory* Vol.1 No.1, 1995.

25 The editorial group's reflections on their independence and the circuits of distribution they accessed are documented through interviews and statements in Virginia Nimarkoh (Ed.), *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: Camberwell Press, 1999, pp.33-37; Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*. London: Flamingo, 2002, pp.31-32; Paul Claydon, 'Tropes', in Maria Fusco and Ian Hunt. *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*. London: Bookworks, 2004, pp.123-128; Damian Abbott, 'Inventory' in *Ibid*, p.183 and *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13.



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# INVENTORY

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**Losing**

**Finding**

**Collecting**

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Vol.4 No.1 2000

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Coagulum.....	Inventory
A Representation of Rhythms.....	Michelle Barber
Anthropofferjism Manifesto.....	Steve Beard
Limen.....	Patrick Ward
Another Orwellian Misnomer.....	Josephine Berry
Dispatch June 00.....	Institute of Open Studies
Glossary.....	Inventory
Oracular Architecture.....	Paul Claydon
The Switch.....	Jakob Jakobsen
Extensive Bodies.....	Damian Abbott

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Image: Cover, Inventory, Vol.4 No.1, 2000

The first element structuring the journal is the cover. The cover contains the title, the strapline, the volume and issue number and the date. Also, on the cover below the title, strapline, volume, issue and date, is a table of contents for the issue. Every issue cover, with only one exception, bore the table of contents in the identical graphic layout. The exception, the final 'Tenth Anniversary Double Issue' Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005 bore instead the legend 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs' 1995-2005' in place of the table of contents which anyway would have been too long to fit on the cover. The back cover was almost never printed on, even though this might have communicated further information about the journal's contents e.g. by the standard industry format of the book summary, endorsement or back cover text. Yet very occasionally, exceptionally we might say, the inside back cover was printed upon.<sup>26</sup>

Listing a magazine's contents on the cover is today relatively unusual. Contemporary magazines generally list highlights, a few features or just an overall theme for the specific issue. Obviously having no image on the cover is also unusual, so much so that as *Inventory* nestled alongside other magazines in bookshops and art gallery shelves, its lack of images; its seeming dependence for communication only on text; its very austerity, or transparency, had a significant impact. The second quality of the card cover determining *Inventory*'s separation from the other published commodities amongst which it might be found was its texture. Both viewed with the eye and touched by the hand a copy of *Inventory* proffered a certain grain and traction. Other magazines slip and slide in the hand, against themselves or off the shelf, while this journal does not, instead it tends to stay rigidly still, gaining traction from its textured front and back and from the strong thick spine and page edging. The choice of card seems emphasises the solidity and thickness of what is still, essentially, a small magazine. Glancing quickly at a single issue or a stack of issues one might mistake it for something thicker or deeper, a cardboard or wooden box bearing a printed inscription. The cover does not catch reflections or bounce off light, but rather absorbs it, and its depth seems to throw the text and indeed its own edges into sharper relief making the whole seem somewhat strictly defined and sculptural, emphasising its boxy object-status.

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26 These exceptions are No.1 Vol.1, 1995; where the 'notes for contributors' is printed on the inside cover; Vol.3 No.3, 1999 in which an advert for LAB books is printed and Vol.4; No.1, 2000 where a satirical advert for a job opportunity at the ICA is presented.

# Table of Contents

There are two versions of the table of contents for each issue of *Inventory*: one printed on the cover and one immediately inside on the first right-facing page. This interior facing page reproduces, in miniature and black and white, the entire cover including the horizontal bars structuring it visually but with the inclusion of additional information. The additional information slightly alters for each issue but always includes the page numbers of the contributions, which are not list on the front cover, and in the case of the glossary section, a further miniature table of contents of this section is included but without a page by page numbering of each entry. While dotted lines stretch between the justified edges of title (aligned left) and author (aligned right) on the front cover, in the interior table of contents authors name follow titles after a single dash and page numbers are aligned right. Only in the glossary section is the same title (aligned left) and author (aligned right), separated by dotted lines, reproduced. Through these small but crucial changes the cover maintains its vision of absolute simplicity, while the interior begins to suggest that within this simplicity further complexities might unfold.

## The Glossary

*Inventory*'s Glossary develops the relationship between material phenomena and writing suggested by *Inventory*'s title. This section follows the form and style of a critical, philosophical or satirical dictionary in the enlightenment, journalistic and surrealist traditions.<sup>27</sup> Whereas a dictionary or encyclopaedia suggests comprehensiveness, a glossary is partial and tends towards the interpretive and explanatory.<sup>28</sup> *Inventory* adapted this tradition to suit a serial form, publishing small alphabetically ordered collections of definitions or glosses in each issue. The glossary appeared in almost every issue of *Inventory* from Vol.1 No.2 1996 through to the final double issue Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005.<sup>29</sup> The glossaries are simply listed in the cover table of contents as *Inventory*, 'Glossary'

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27 Some historical models would be Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopedie* (1751-1772), Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697-1702), Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911) or the 'Dictionnaire Critique' (critical dictionary) developed in the pages of surrealist magazine *Documents*. The publishing initiatives of Georges Bataille are further considered in Chapter 2. Georges Bataille's philosophical and methodological contribution for *Inventory* is explored in Chapter 3.

28 'Gloss' and 'Glossary' in Catherine Soanes & Angus Stevenson (Eds), *Concise English Oxford Dictionary*, (Eleventh Edition), Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, n.p.

29 Issue Vol.1 No.1 contained a related contribution by Toni da Silva entitled 'Categories' and the special issue 'Collected' Vol.2 No.2 1997 contained a section entitled 'Inventories' authored by *Inventory*.

suggesting authorial responsibility fell wholly on the core editorial group. *Inventory*'s glossaries were initially authored primarily by the core and secondary editorial groups. However, as the journal developed an increasingly diverse range of contributors participated in writing entries. Each Glossary presents terms in alphabetical order. Arranged in two-columns, the glossary section breaks with the single column formatting of the rest of the journal. Another minor difference is found in the in-line titling (Vol.1, No.2, 1996) and later hard return (from Vol.1, No.3, 1996 onwards) where the titles, usually a single word, are rendered bold to distinguish them from the flow of the text. As well as the interior Table of Contents where glossary entries were attributed with full authors' names, each glossary provided author attribution via initials printed below each entry. The first Glossary contained in Vol.1 No.2 1996 was the final article of the journal, with the second glossary printed in penultimate position, after a found text, thereafter in subsequent issues the glossary generally found its position towards the middle of the journal. The shortest glossary, published in Vol.2 No.3, 1999, contains only three entries. The longest glossaries are each ten entries long, the average is six entries.<sup>30</sup>

Each Glossary is formed by a series of entries often under one-word headings, either objects, nouns or abstract nouns (states, feelings or actions): 'Alcopops', 'Death', 'Escape', 'Stone', 'Aerial', 'Anteater', 'Armadillo', 'Kebabed', 'Smokers'; 'Possession' and so on. Individual glossary entries were frequently illustrated with a single image, and in longer entries a run of images was often arranged dynamically in relation to the entries' columns.<sup>31</sup> The journal's aspiration to become 'a space for a theory/practice that conjoins and conflicts writing and image, found and made, the lost and the discovered' was explored extensively and experimentally in this section.<sup>32</sup> Despite its designation as a separate section, some longer entries in the Glossary can still be considered 'essays' and therefore this section can also be understood to be regulated by the desire to develop 'the essay as a form'.<sup>33</sup> Further support for this view is given by the knowledge that *Inventory* also published Glossary entries as essays in other publications.<sup>34</sup> The relationship between the essay, critical thought and the glossary or critical dictionary shall be considered further in Chapters 2, 3

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30 *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997 and *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999.

31 Two key examples are Adam Scrivener, 'Photo booth', *Inventory*, Vol.2, No.1, 1997, pp.73-79 and Adam Scrivener 'Remote Control', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.91-92.

32 'Notes to Contributors', op. cit.

33 'Notes to Contributors', op. cit.

34 This true of both the essays and glossary section but more common in terms of the glossary. An example is *Inventory*'s essay on 'Death' published in Welfare State International, *Dead*, Ulverston: Welfare State International, 2001 (published on the occasion of the touring exhibition *Dead*, at Camden Roundhouse, London 2-10 March, 2001 and Lanternhouse, Ulverston, Cumbria, 29 March-30 June, 2001. Printed on a body bag, the text also formed part of *Inventory*'s contribution to the exhibition. The text was republished as *Inventory*, 'Death', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.138-131.

and 4 in relation to *Inventory*'s influences and methodological explorations, and in the considerations of the journal as a unified but fragmentary object of knowledge in Chapter 5. On occasion several authors each contributed entries for a single word e.g. 'Comply' in *Inventory* Vol.3 No.1 1998, resulting in a game in which several players would 'take turns' generating multiple distinct 'takes' or 'definitions' or responses to a single term.<sup>35</sup> The generation of such a homespun 'heap of linguistic fragments', according to Sianne Ngai, 'calls attention to language as the site where system and subject intersect [...] where system and subject converge is more specifically where language piles up and becomes "dense"'.<sup>36</sup> By assembling these competing 'definitions' or interpretations the Glossary explored contradictions between system and individuation, or determination and flexibility, over which standard dictionaries tend to regulate by 'unfreez[ing] concepts'.<sup>37</sup> The Glossary provided an open forum for the satire of existing classification systems and dictionaries, but also a means of incrementally building up new knowledge and identifying sites of 'density', as well as interacting with the essays in the form of an 'aside' or marginal 'gloss' accompanying and transforming their insights in another register. This could be understood as undermining the systematic proposition of the journal as a whole or creating a field of tension between its components.

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35 *Inventory* Vol.3 No.1 1998.

36 Sianne Ngai, 'Stuplimity', in *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp.248–297, p.288 and pp.263–264.

37 Via the writing of Fredric Jameson S.S. Prawer indicates the centrality of the transformation of categories to Marx's method in *Capital* Vol.1. 'Jameson has argued with explicit reference to the opening chapter of *Capital* I, could be seen as "a model of the way in which content, through its own inner logic, generates those categories in terms of which it organizes itself into a formal structure". It thus provided "a classic demonstration of dialectical thinking as a ceaseless generation and dissolution of intellectual categories". Dialectical thinking, as Marx here demonstrates it, may be seen as "doubly historical: not only are the phenomena with which it works historical in character, but it must unfreeze the very concepts with which they have been understood, and interpret the very immobility of the latter as historical phenomena in their own right."' Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, quoted in SS Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, p.346.



## Essays

Apart from the Glossary section, and with the exceptions of the Editorials and Found Texts which I shall treat forthwith, all contributions published in *Inventory* journal, whether purely visual or text-based, are treated and presented in an equality of format and ordering. I shall therefore treat all these contributions as ‘essays’.<sup>38</sup> The stated intention of the journal as articulated within the editors’ public address in the ‘Notes to Contributors’ was to ‘develop [...] the essay as a form’.<sup>39</sup> In formulating the journal’s task this way, the editors referenced a celebrated text, ‘The Essay as Form’ (1958), by Theodor Adorno where the philosopher indicates aspects of the essay which commend it to critical thought on account of, rather than despite, the form’s apparent obsolescence.<sup>40</sup> The idea of recovering an outmoded form strikes resonance with the rather antiquated appearance of *Inventory*’s cover, the seemingly archaic glossary section and other thematic content which we will later explore.

The way this choice is framed in the ‘Notes to Contributors’ indicates that *Inventory* were attracted to the essay’s flexibility, fragmentary nature and singularity of method. The essay form eschews scientific method but also purely literary or artistic values. *Inventory*’s editors stressed ‘we do not wish this method to have a scientific character [...] nor an artistic, literary value’.<sup>41</sup> The lack of cover image, its insistence on textual self-sufficiency, supports this anti- or extra-artistic agenda. However, the emphasis in the ‘Notes for Contributors’ on ‘[t]he relationship between word and image’ and the desire to ‘conjoin and conflict word and image’ places images in a position of ‘paramount importance’ and on a level with text.<sup>42</sup> The origins of the essay format has an historical relationship to the development of anthropological writing in the work of Montaigne.<sup>43</sup> The tradition

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38 The ‘film essay’ was a popular form in contemporary art and literature of the 1990s and 2000s, notably a form developed in the UK by one of *Inventory*’s editorial group’s tutors at Middlesex, English Surrealist, architectural historian and filmmaker Patrick Keiller, and this almost certainly had an impact on *Inventory*’s editors and contributors several of whom also worked as filmmakers. This is most directly evident in two contributions: Damian Abbott, ‘Paper Assembly’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.78-83, which combines film stills and textual quotations in a montaged meditation on memory, media and mediation, and *Inventory*, ‘Flesh and Stone’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.44–50, which is a transcription from the script of a film essay made by the editors of *Inventory* journal and exhibited under the group name *Inventory*.

39 ‘Notes to Contributors’, op. cit.

40 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Essay As Form’ in *Notes to Literature Vol.1*, Columbia University Press, (1958) 1991, pp.3-23.

41 ‘Notes to Contributors’, op. cit.

42 ‘Notes to Contributors’, op. cit.

43 Michèle Richman argues that ‘the long-standing tradition emanating from Montaigne’s daring essay on cannibalism’ involving forms of ‘[c]ultural comparison’ which had ‘allowed thinkers from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to circumvent censorship and address controversial issues’ and which ‘fostered a mode of

Montaigne established through his *essais* (1580-1595), sought to foster scepticism rather than prove or disprove a specific argument and drew readers into an exploratory process of the movement of thought by presenting a personal reflections around a particular object. *Essai* translates as ‘attempt’, in a late editorial *Inventory* drew upon this meaning, arguing: ‘essay can also be used to mean a trial or to test, to make an attempt, or to set forth on some act or adventure.’<sup>44</sup> Though in terms of the operations of the group as a whole they emphasised the essay as but one of the ‘diverse formats’ the group made ‘presentation[s] of material’ in.<sup>45</sup> The essay suggests the presence of other essays, perhaps an anthology or compilation of essays. Whereas an encyclopedia is developed by single and definitive entries, an essay or series of essays may visit an object of study or theme more than once, taking different approaches or discussing different aspects of its object. What the essay is or, indeed, how *Inventory* developed it, is best engaged through the diversity of formats of ‘the essay’ published in the journal. These included textual and photographic collages, photo-essays, reports, surveys, maps, poems, fold out sheets or posters. Frequently, essays in *Inventory* were composed of quotations, published documents, or even entirely of pre-existing elements.<sup>46</sup> Such texts can be discussed in terms of collages of existing textual sources, but also their ‘diagrammatic’ qualities.<sup>47</sup> Artist projects might be listed as other essays on the cover and table of contents but in fact on occasion interrupt the other contributions and span the page run of a journal.<sup>48</sup> These and other contributions explore the boundaries between finished and unfinished work, relays between essays published in *Inventory* and works extant in situ elsewhere or published elsewhere, critical commentary and original text, surrealism as literary movement or ‘anthropo-colonial tradition’ involving field work and museology.<sup>49</sup>

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anthropological thinking’ was ‘revived and emulated in the twentieth century by the founding figures of modern French sociology and anthropology, from Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss.’ Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p.vii.

44 *Inventory*, ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.6.

45 *Inventory* quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

46 A significance which licenses further remarks upon textual piracy in the context of a discussion of the essay is the proximity of the etymological meanings of ‘*pirate*’ to those of ‘*essay*’: ‘*pirate*, n. — L. *pírāta*, fr. [...]; ‘*pirate*, corsair’, fr. [...] ‘to attempt, attack’, fr. [...], ‘trial, attempt, experience’, which is cogn. with L. *peritus*, ‘experienced’, *periculum*, ‘trial, experiment, risk, danger’.’ Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 2003, p.563.

47 This is a discussion I take up again in Chapters 2 and 5 based on the recent work of Johanna Drucker, Johanna Drucker, ‘Diagrammatic Writing’. *New Formations*, No.78 (2013): pp.83–101.

48 Two good examples here are Max Reeves’ photo project ‘Glamour’, Max Reeves, ‘Glamour’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001, pp.26-27, p.67, p.85, p.99, p.109, p.117, p.122, p.125 where single and double page spreads are inserted between the other contributions to this issue and the final image in the run is followed by a short essay on Reeves’ project by Denise Kum, ‘Focussing Attention’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001, pp.123–124, and Steve Claydon and Neil Chapman, ‘The Opposite of a Good Idea’ a four page wide folding insert containing free hand text and diagrams (glued between pages 50–51) Steve Claydon and Neil Chapman, ‘The Opposite of a Good Idea’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999.

49 ‘Anthropofferjism Manifesto’, op. cit., p.34.

Equally, in contrast to this apparent unorthodoxy, many contributions could pass muster in an anthropological, art historical, history, critical theory, urban studies, numerology, life sciences, literary, or architecture journal.<sup>50</sup> These disciplinary approaches to the essay often still held surprises in terms of their estrangement of the topic in view or by ostensible mimesis of, but abrupt and unpredictable departure from, academic essay form or tone.<sup>51</sup> Some contributors were academics by profession.<sup>52</sup> Yet, equally amateurs often approached specialist topics in academic formats. Typically the members of the core group contributed individually authored articles, essays and artist's projects to the journal as well as authoring editorials collectively as 'Inventory'. These were presented amidst diverse contributions formed from solicited submissions (where editors approached contributors directly), 'unsolicited' submissions (those sent to the editors by email or post) and a third category 'involuntary' submissions (texts found in the street or in other publications). In a final editorial published in *Inventory*'s last issue, the editors returned to reflection upon, and defence of, the essay as form. Arguing for the fragmentary or incomplete state of their overall enterprise, drawing analogy with the fragmentary form of the essay – one which never made 'a product' – the editors concluded, if the root meaning of essay is attempt, then, 'Inventory are essayists'.<sup>53</sup> The significance of the essay, for *Inventory*, can be considered to comprise a means of presentation, a form for experimentation and a concept orientating their method. The essay is therefore treated throughout this study: in relation to historical models orientating the journal in Chapter 2; as integral to the method the group and journal aimed to foster in Chapter 3 and 4, and in relation to the journal as form in Chapter 5.

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50 See Appendices: Indices

51 Indeed, an editorial states in a not entirely desultory way, 'at any moment it may be a resting place for the off-sloughings of academia, a bolt hole for the fugitive, or a snare for the unsuspecting passing comment, but never is it a dumb vessel.' *Inventory*, 'Fierce Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1997, pp.5-8, p.5.

52 Felicitas Becker; Ranko Bon; John Cussans, Krzysztof Fijalkowski; Mark Jamieson; Esther Leslie; Laurent Van Lancker; Marysia Lewandowska; Michael Richardson and Rakesh Sidhu were each employed in academic positions during the period of their writing for *Inventory*.

53 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', op. cit., p.6.

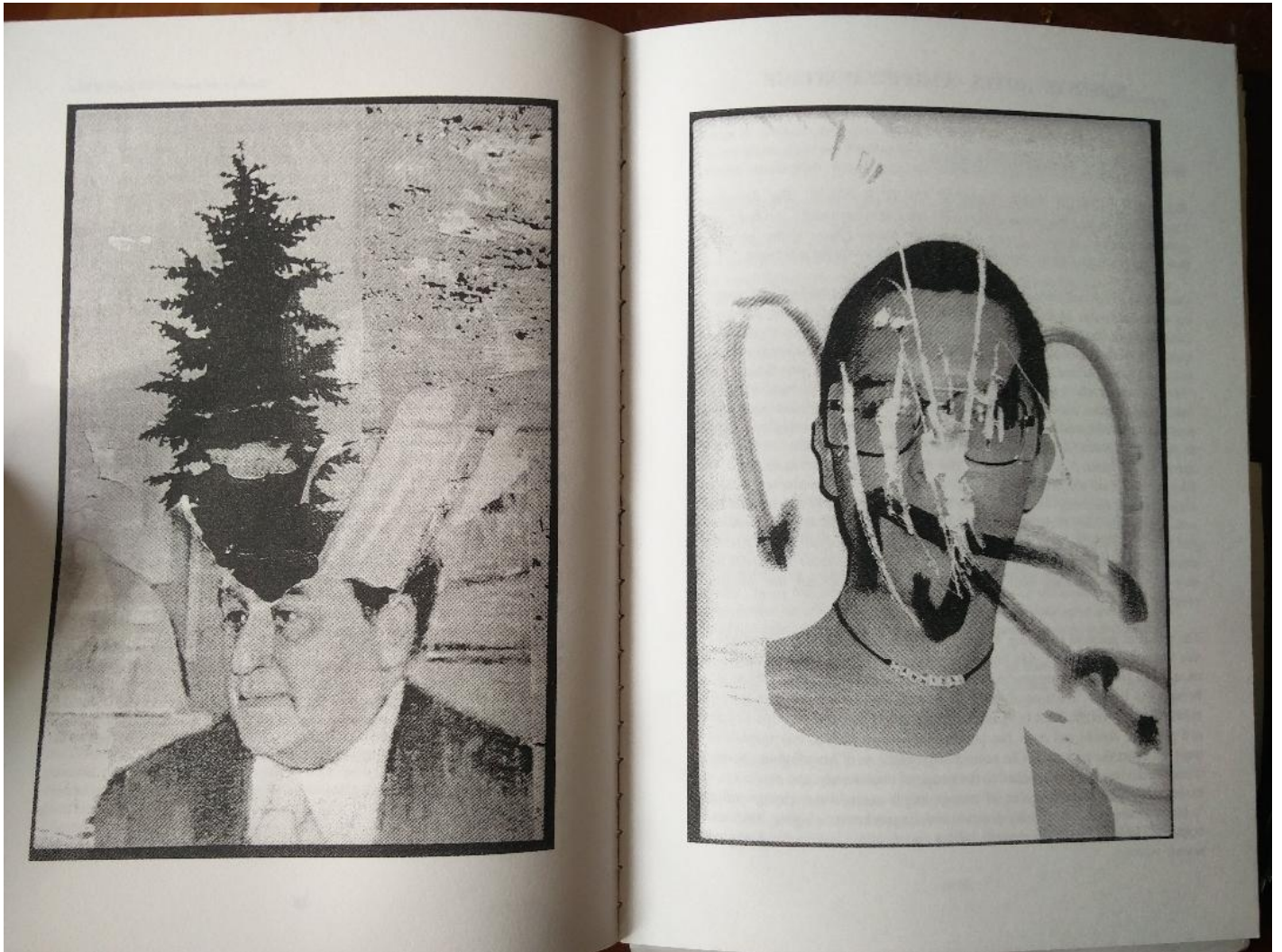


Image: Max Reeves, 'Glamour', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001, pp.26-27

## FOR A SOCIOLOGY...

*"the inventory of the streets is inexhaustable"*  
Walter Benjamin

Although we are not new we are fiercely sociological. Our material has been collected from the four corners of the floating city, and no object, text, picture has been held in higher esteem than the other. Inventory is like a net, cast it into the sea and you are sure to catch some kind of fish; anthropology, fine arts, history, genealogy, (sexual) politics, eroticism, fashions, popular culture<sup>1</sup> militaria, laughter and erring.

The urgency of a correct classification of things has meant that Inventory had to come about. An expedient measure, which upon its dissemination shall prove to its readers things that we, the authors, cannot even guess at. New constellations, subjects, themes at once contradictory and apposite, coming into direct collision with one another, flattering themselves, entering into secret discourses, leaving residues and traces never before detected - NEVER BEFORE SOUGHT. Inventory is a means of writing, recording, reclassifying and cataloguing the social material life that exists around us. This is our goal, to take measures that bring about a cataract where hierarchical distinctions between things, between their values, becomes impossible, indeed, POINTLESS. We choose to dispense with traditional epistemological thinking by playing with category and convention, a space flexible enough for an endless interplay of differences, coincidences and connections, NOT HOMO SAPIENS BUT HOMO LUDENS! We are at the disposal of the eclectic and the specialist alike. But better, much better, the schizophrenic who, through his ever changing speciality betrays an eclecticism unknown even to himself, revealing hidden agendas of unquantifiable depth or shallowness, of indeterminable duration, knowing only that the hierarchy of knowledges, facts, statistics ...

Inventory Vol. No.1

4

For a sociology ...

truths should be resisted and that all objects, all things can be rendered to analysis beneath the passionately objective gaze of this, our fierce sociology.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theology?

Inventory



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Image: Inventory, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5

## Editorials

The editorials are comprised by the first text in each issue always authored collectively by the core editors and attributed to Inventory. These lead articles were written by one or more of the core editorial group and assumed the first person plural, an ‘editorial we’, and spoke for the aims and values of the journal and its editors. These texts frequently reflect on the method and aims of the journal and the wider significances of the practices of the core and secondary editorial groups, even often in essayistic mode, these shall be treated here and throughout the study as editorial statements.<sup>54</sup>

Central to the initiation and development of the journal as a project was the editorial group’s stated intention to develop a method they described as a ‘fierce sociology’. The phrase is first mentioned in the opening editorial to the first issue of the journal, ‘For a Sociology’.<sup>55</sup> The method and its sociological and surrealist influences are explored in greater depth in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, what I shall say now forms only a brief introduction. The method of a fierce sociology can be understood as foundational to the journal and its editorial outlook. Its announcement provides the key prism of initial editorial orientation. As a direction to contributors it suggests the relevance any subject matter providing it is approached in a ‘passionately objective’ mode; as a direction to readers these statements encourage subjective and serious engagement, attention to the particular interests of each text and the overall ensemble of their presentation.<sup>56</sup> Yet, the method also gestures beyond the pages of the journal towards actions and the group’s aspiration that *Inventory* could name ‘an ongoing process whose form we can only guess at.’<sup>57</sup> It is therefore significant that amongst the editorials several texts (‘Without Intent’, ‘Outlier’ and ‘Coagulum’) report back upon and reflect upon

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54 Ross Allan Eaman dates the development of the modern editorial, where by a lead article would appear to speak for the paper itself, to New York newspapers of the 1830s: ‘Bennett’s use of the editorial “we” implied that his opinions in the *New York Herald* were the collective voice of the paper, while Greeley began making use of several writers to produce an editorial page for the *New York Tribune*.’ Ross Allan Eaman, *The A to Z of Journalism*. Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2009, p.26.

55 Inventory, ‘For a Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5. The method was revisited in a self-critical mode in several subsequent editorials and other texts published in the journal. Inventory, ‘Fierce Sociology’ *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8; Inventory, ‘The Method of a Fierce Sociology’, *Inventory* Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.4-7. Outside of these editorials an example of an essay dealing with the method is Inventory, ‘An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket’, *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-159. The phrase is mentioned in passing in various other texts authored by the group, significant is the extent to which it remained a consistently re-examined term for their collective practice, cf. Inventory, ‘Without Intent’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.4-9 and Inventory, ‘Coagulum’, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.4-12.

56 Inventory, ‘For a Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, p.5.

57 Virginia Nimarkoh (Ed.), *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.



actions, even what we could construe as ‘field work’ of the group, respectively Inventory Survey Project; *Outlier*, an installation at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and *Coagulum*, a performance intervention carried out in Oxford Circus and Kingston Shopping Centre.<sup>58</sup>

Other editorials – such as ‘I Kingsland Passage’<sup>59</sup> and ‘I Want More Life Fucker’ – drop the first person plural for the first person singular to explore extreme subjective states of anger, drunkenness, madness, the city, fate and rebellion. ‘Predictive Nostalgia’ from the second issue, presents an analysis of a series of travel photographs to produce a strange essay reflecting on the customs and status of memory, nostalgia, travel, tourism, photography and anthropology. ‘Orpheus Street’ applies the idea of ‘diagonal classification’ to both the city and the supermarket proposing a reorganisation of existing classification systems. In ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’ *Inventory* clarify their intention to renew methods of materialist research and specify in more detail their own approach to the ‘objects’ of their investigations.<sup>60</sup> ‘Inventory: Cool, Calm and...’, an editorial which introduces a special issue of the journal appearing in association with the exhibition *Collected* curated by Neil Cummings at the Photographers Gallery, London,<sup>61</sup> considers the journal as one of many collections the group has presented and insists ‘these collections or presentations exist for the moment only’.<sup>62</sup> This editorial is the shortest of all, comprising a single page consisting of only two paragraphs, supplemented by three pages of installation shots from the group’s cabinet exhibitions at SOAS (1994), Museum of Mankind (1995), Workfortheeyetodo (1996), British Council Gallery; Prague (1996). ‘Exile & Kingdom’ ponders the universal value of architecture and the possibility of its autonomy in the context of the unbridled development taking hold of London at the beginning of a long financial and building expansion.<sup>63</sup> A final editorial, ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’ resumes the third person plural to reflect on the reception of the journal and the difficulties of its production and continuation: ‘it has been the search and establishment of a singular and multiple voice(s), that is the concern of any collective undertaking, which has been the most difficult to achieve and nurture.’<sup>64</sup> The text goes on to consider at length the meaning of the essay as a form and in its wider implications for ethos of the journal and the group. As such the editorials lay out a

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58 *Inventory*, ‘Without Intent’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.4-9 and *Inventory*, ‘Coagulum’, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.4-12.

59 The figure or authorial marker Kingsland Passage, appears first in this text ‘I Kingsland Passage’, then as an author in Kingsland Passage, ‘The Last Days of London’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.72-77 and later as a persona – the Reverend Kingsland Passage – in a video work made by the group.

60 *Inventory*, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8. This editorial is discussed at length in Chapter 3.

61 The exhibition ran 26 April – 21 June 1997.

62 *Inventory*, ‘Cool, Calm and ...’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997, pp.4-7, p.4.

63 *Inventory*, ‘Exile & Kingdom’, Vol.4 No.2, 2001, pp.4-13.

64 *Inventory*, ‘We Refuse To Confirm Your Beliefs’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.5-13, p.5.

method, exemplarise and evaluate its practice and reflect on its results. In doing so they retain a liveness and combative spirit, moving between explication and embodiment retaining and revisiting the impulse to produce categories, stage presentations and overturn existing classifications.



## TIME TO GO ONLY

The following text was discovered in a builders skip some years ago in West London. Some people doubted the authenticity of a similar document published in our first issue so we are presenting a section of this document in facsimile form.

- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- END OF TIME - ONLY
- 3 AND 4 - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- END OF ALL LIFE
- ALSO TOO ALSO - ONLY
- END OF ALL TIME
- TOO ALSO ALSO - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- THE QUEEN IS A
- PIG - ONLY
- BEAT UP THE
- PIG - ONLY
- BEAT UP THE
- HOG - ONLY
- BEAT UP THE
- QUEEN - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- TO KILL ROBERT
- STACK THE ACTOR
- ONLY
- SECOND SHOT - ONLY
- MURDER - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY

- END OF TIME - ONLY
- END OF TYRANICAL
- RULE - ONLY
- END OF TYRANY
- ONLY
- DEATH TO ALL - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- WRITTEN - ONLY
- END OF TIME - ONLY
- APPENDIX - ONLY
- CALL TO ME - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- WRITTEN - ONLY
- ENCLOSURES - ONLY
- OF THOUGHT - ONLY
- TRANSPOSITION - ONLY
- INSERT - ONLY
- IN SETS - ONLY
- SETS - ONLY
- WRITTEN - ONLY
- IN WRITING - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY
- 1 AND 2 - ONLY
- TIME TO GO - ONLY

Image: Found text, 'Time To Go Only', Vol.1 No.3, 1996, pp.88-89.

## Found Texts

This collection of texts is not sectioned off separately, but, like the editorials, its items appear listed in the main body of the table of contents along with all other essays or within the glossary section. Generally, Found Texts can be identified and categorised as such through their positioning, usually as the last contribution in the journal, through their authorial attribution: 'A Found Text'.<sup>65</sup> Found texts were also located in the main section of the journal as essays, however, on several occasions shorter found texts were included in the glossary section. Found Texts were often included in two formats, typed in the standard text layout of essays in the journal and as facsimiles of the original handwritten, or typed document.<sup>66</sup> Whilst the found texts present some of the more anomalous contributions to *Inventory*, in terms of all other content in *Inventory* their uniform difference is their authorial status, since though many contributions in *Inventory* were published under pseudonym's, the person's behind these authorial personas are traceable, whereas not only are the found texts effectively anonymous, the texts were published without their author's permission. It is almost certain that their authors knew nothing of their text's publication in *Inventory*. These involuntary submissions in many cases have their own specific and quite often innovative integral layouts. As well as typed transcription for legibility, these are preserved as far as is possible through the reproduction of the handwritten originals. These, like some of the texts discussed earlier invoke sometimes 'diagrammatic' as well as scriptural modes of communication. Presented with almost no commentary aside from identifying the site of the text's discovery, the editors of *Inventory* seemed at pains to neither distort nor soften the surprising alterity of these texts. *Inventory* sought to publish them 'without recourse to a comforting representation of what we believe we are.'<sup>67</sup> Whilst the found texts are presented as closely as possible to other content in the journal, does the reproduction of their, often handwritten, original form perhaps distinguish them as bearing a greater authenticity than other contributions to the journal? There is a forensic quality to this presentation, making of them *documents* in a sense, evidence of something as yet unknown, unexplicated – perhaps of

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65 Exceptions to these rules are as follows: two texts which fit this form are attributed to authors, Joseph the Prophet, 'Joseph's Christian Circus', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.?? and Stanley Owen-Green, 'Eight Passion Proteins With Care', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.13–23; several found texts were each included in the Glossary section: 'Anagram' Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, 'Die', Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997; 'Illusions', Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997; 'Motto', A Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, p.48; 'Spirits'. Found Text (notes by Daniel Love Peacock), Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999.

66 *Inventory*, Vol. 2 No.3 features 4 found texts (3 in the glossary 1 in the main journal section) and *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 features 4 of found texts (3 in the main journal body 1 in the glossary).

67 'Outlier', op. cit., p.5.

communicative speech which is as yet unassimilable to discourse.<sup>68</sup> This forensic quality is also further supported through the shared themes of policing, confession, crime and accusation across this set of texts.<sup>69</sup> In an anthropological framework we might understand them as case studies, field notes, examples of ritualised repetition, cultural enigmas or social facts. In an artistic framework they may be understood as ‘outsider art’, texts written by outsiders (non-recognised artists) characterised by ‘identification or consignment to a position outside, whether through race or citizenship, sexuality, psychiatric status, or perceived deprivation of personal agency.’<sup>70</sup> Yet, if they are presented as evidence, of what are they evidence? Or if artworks, what then of the claims *Inventory* would have on that status through the gesture of nominating them? The found texts therefore present several problems for interpretation, but these are interesting problems and perhaps problems *Inventory* wished to encourage rather than assuage. My proposition is that each section, as designated above: the Essays, Editorials, Glossary, Found Texts interacts, across the two poles constituted as ‘Abstract’ and ‘Material’ language, exploring and exploiting their tensions oppositions and possibilities for the recomposition of their inherited boundaries and limits.

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68 For example the text ‘Time to Go Only’ was published in two parts, a facsimile version of the text was published without transcription as proof of the text’s ‘authenticity’. ‘The following text was discovered in a builders skip some years ago in West London. Some people doubted the authenticity of a similar document published in our first issue so we are presenting a section of this document in facsimile form.’ Anon., ‘Time to Go Only’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.88-100, p.88.

69 ‘Time to Go Only’ ‘The following text was discovered in a builders skip some years ago in West London. Some people doubted the authenticity of a similar document published in our first issue so we are presenting a section of this document in facsimile form.’ p.88

70 [http://neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu/events/uc/outsider\\_writing\\_opening\\_presentation/](http://neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu/events/uc/outsider_writing_opening_presentation/)

# Selected Projects

The following projects are described to illustrate the complex of interconnections between *Inventory* journal and the art group's performance and installation practice.

### The Profound Purchase.

People are encouraged to, and do, recognize unwholeness; whether or not that unwholeness IS.

Therefore, to recognize unwholeness (in themselves:) Which should be considered as post- $X^d$ , they must have, or have been fed, images of  $X^u$ .

These images are cultural products. A given.

To overcome unwholeness there is a process of recognizing, seeking, assimilating.

I.E. Consuming.

However, A, the consumed may not fulfill its promise

and, B, an image proffering greater promises of greater wholeness may then arrive; which in itself will indicate unwholeness in all previous activity.

The process restarts.

[illegible]

X, POST X, PRE-X?

There is great debate over the nature of "X." Perhaps because it is a matter of individual choice, or rather, consumer choice, for we all have our own Profound Purchase. On the other hand, that process (recognizing, seeking, assimilating,) is situated within the malaise of cultures, ethnology, societies, civilizations etc. More specifically and more relative to our concerns it is a process prevalent within those areas occupied by capitalism and state capitalism.

It is a method by which the structure of capital has endorsed, colonised, the activities of consciousness.

(Activities which previously have been dominated by religious structures.)

Which, however, if not channeled by the dominant economic structure may well

Nick Norton1<<12.07.16>>1

Profound Purchase 1st text

- would -

Image: Facsimile of the manuscript of 'The Profound Purchase', 1989. Personal collection of Nick Norton

-The Profound Purchase-

Unwholeness/alienation (cause) P.P as EFFECT

value systems

We can understand P.P in many ways;-INFINITE DEBT (cannot exist without this)

P.P is an obstacle which prevents individuals from achieving their real desires

We are never given an opportunity to make choices for ourselves.....

.....  
.....

.....Our desires are channeled (Real or False)?

-what does it matter?-are they innate or manufactured.

P.P:- asmanufactured desire,artificial fictions of another We are not,or rather,  
we are dissuaded from inventing our own fictions,desires etc. (this may be dangerous)

Many desires have their roots in the essential nature of mankind--since the beginning

these desires have been displaced,removed and channeled by the rise of WORK,

THE STATE AND ITS BANKRUPT MORAL ORDER..

So new manufactured desires are put in to place: goals,rewards,products,promotion  
titles,medals,comfort,commendation,etc.....  
.....

all these serve for the greater good of society////////which stops people from  
turning their attention to the fact that they are,in fact, in an alienated and  
subordinate position..°

## The Profound Purchase

‘The Profound Purchase’ presents a complex object with which to associate *Inventory* since its genesis falls some six years before the journal first commence publishing. However, it is included here because it forms a significant precursor to *Inventory*’s project of ‘writing in common’ and may be thought of as a kind of prototype of the journal itself. Through it a loose group of collaborators, several of whom would become regular contributors or contributing editors to *Inventory*, ‘imagined [...] a mechanism of consumerism which bore within it an inherent instability’ – a process or entity which ‘promised the world’.<sup>71</sup> In 1989 the group formed at Middlesex Polytechnic made a performative reading of this collectively written text, ‘The Profound Purchase’ (1989-1990) at the flat of Adam Scrivener’s partner Morisa.<sup>72</sup> A video was made of this reading and was subsequently destroyed. The text was co-authored (written primarily through conversations between Neville, Scrivener and Norton and typed-up on a typewriter by Norton) but not authored as *Inventory*. The text was circulated within Middlesex Polytechnic. Adam Scrivener claims the idea for ‘a project’ was frequently discussed amongst this group of Middlesex Polytechnic Fine Art graduates, the idea for a journal came up in discussion only once and did not develop further until the later formation at Chelsea College.<sup>73</sup> Nick Norton describes the text in terms by which it sought to occupy the ground of the commodity object in order to undermine or contest the state of subjecthood and objecthood.

I would say that it was a text in which we began imagining we could produce this contested object which, when purchased, might activate in reader/consumer the... what... object as sapper of objecthood? Subject as radical query of the subjective? It was humorous – somewhat. It was for a long period stalled one step before the practical doing of it, largely because of the mania of London survival.<sup>74</sup>

The Profound Purchase went directly to the core of some key themes which would be pursued

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71 ‘we imagined the Profound Purchase as a mechanism of consumerism which bore within it an inherent instability. It “promised the world” in a form which was neither a promise (solemn oath, honest transaction) nor the world, nor possible world; not the riches of the moment and certainly not the transformative step from here into what might be. All too often any purchase, profound or otherwise, quickly dissolved down into the world as it was, therefore proving nothing other than the necessity of the process starting again. Because of this constant *begin again* the profound purchase is well suited to capitalism; even so, in its unstable functioning it likewise demonstrates failure.’ Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, April 2018.

72 Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, April 2018.

73 Adam Scrivener, in conversation with the author July, 2017. Although Nick Norton avers that the prospect of a journal constantly surfaced in discussions between Scrivener, Neville, Norton and Morisa around the Profound Purchase and in the intervening years between the Middlesex group’s graduation in 1989 and the founding of the journal in 1993, Nick Norton email correspondence, April 2018.

74 Nick Norton correspondence with the author, 15/07/2015.

in a more diffuse form across the pages of *Inventory* journal: consumerism, the commodity, the consumer, consciousness, subjectivity, investigation as a process, text as process.

I think we imagined the Profound Purchase as a mechanism of consumerism which bore within it an inherent instability. It 'promised the world' in a form which was neither a promise (solemn oath, honest transaction) nor the world, nor possible world; not the riches of the moment and certainly not the transformative step from here into what might be. All too often any purchase, profound or otherwise, quickly dissolved down into the world as it was, therefore proving nothing other than the necessity of the process starting again. Because of this constant *begin again* the profound purchase is well suited to capitalism; even so, in its unstable functioning it likewise demonstrates failure.<sup>75</sup>

The Leibnizian invocation of 'possible worlds' in Norton's gloss is framed within the text by suggestively cybernetic prompts: 'the process restarts' structuring the text. An 'object' is understood to provoke a 'process (recognising, seeking, assimilating)' this process draws a subject into activity, the object is secondary. In a glossary entry entitled 'God', Simon Neville figures the Profound Purchase (PP) as a kind of 'cult' with 'members' and 'followers', whose adherents attempt to purchase that which does not yet exist. This science fictional logical contradiction invokes a convergence of the sacred, consumer desire and aesthetic transcendence upon a single target.<sup>76</sup> 'The Profound Purchase' is again mentioned in passing and cryptically in 'I Want More Life Fucker' (1999).<sup>77</sup> The substantial theological, sociological and aesthetic problems touched upon by 'the Profound Purchase' are understood to be a microcosm of the issues and mode of production *Inventory* later assumed. These two traces of the earlier text and the formation of authors (Norton, Neville, Scrivener) are stolen away in the journal as an internal frame of reference between each other. PP is conceived in these two later texts an effect a consequence of commodification (the transcendental properties of the commodity) and a kind of phantom organisation (a concept which is discussed further in Chapter 5).<sup>78</sup> Further discussion of 'the Profound Purchase' is pursued through the discussion of *Inventory*'s models in terms of its relevance to other journals and forms of artists' writing in Chapter 2 and in terms of the methodological discussions of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

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<sup>75</sup> Nick Norton correspondence with the author, 31/07/2015.

<sup>76</sup> 'Indeed the whole purpose of the PP was to display that a feeling of the divine could still be intuited in our culture, that, against the consensus of opinion on this matter, the object as organised by capital could still aspire to a sense of value.' Simon Neville, 'God', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.33-34, p.34.

<sup>77</sup> 'I repeat, I say again. P.P. effect neutralised through play. Why do you have to be stupid right up to the last moment?' *Inventory*, 'I Want More Life Fucker', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2, 1999, pp.4-7, p.4.

<sup>78</sup> Interestingly in Neville's text *Inventory* and the 'Cult of the Profound Purchase' are configured as separate entities, opposed along respectively anti- and pro-capitalist lines. In the imaginary scenario a 'PP acolyte' is 'challenged' by an 'Inventory Agent' 'God', op. cit., p.33.





Images: (above) Inventory cabinet display at Workfortheeyetodo, London, 10 August – 10 September, 1995 (below) ‘The Inventory of the Streets is Inexhaustible’ (Czech and English), window installation at the British Council Gallery; Prague (1996)

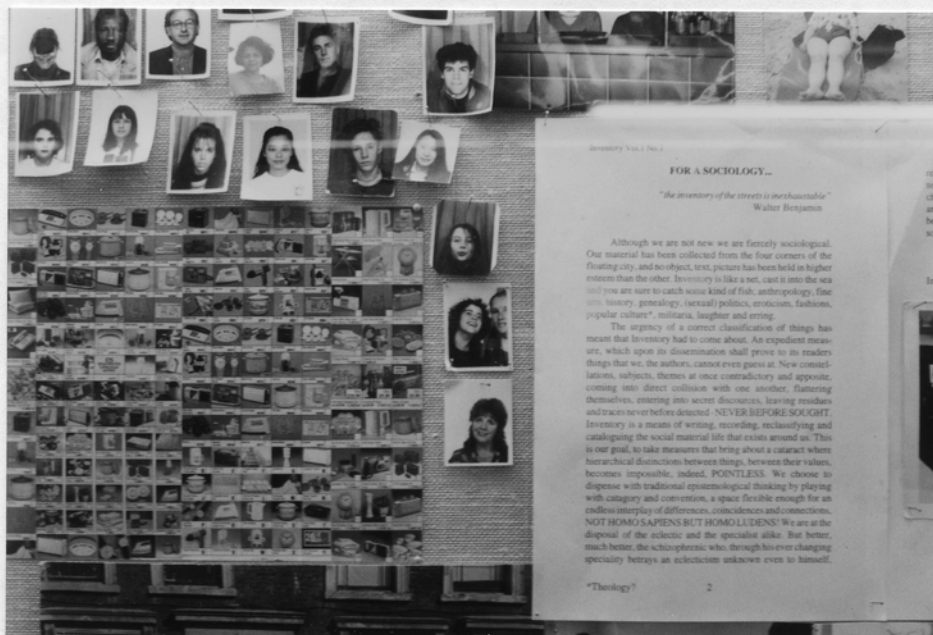
## Exhibitions in Libraries and Exhibitions of Ephemera

In the lead up to launching the journal, core and secondary editors of *Inventory* organised two exhibitions at sites of anthropological research in a series of cabinets outside the library at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS) in September 1994 and in a series of vitrines situated in the foyer the Museum of Mankind, London in early 1995.<sup>79</sup> These small exhibitions were not strictly art exhibitions but instead, with ‘ethnographic overtones’, presented hybrids of documentation, anthropological display and installation art. They were linked to the journal through the inclusion of texts and images related to key journal contributions (e.g. ‘For a Sociology’; ‘Elephant’; ‘The Floating Island’ and ‘Some notes Concerning Easy Listening’ at SOAS) and through the reproduction of images of these displays in the journal.<sup>80</sup> These were ideal settings for the loose collective working on the journal to work in different constellations and were to some extent repeated in further minor displays at the UCL Little Magazines collection (Date not known), the bookshop and gallery Workfortheeyetodo (1996), in a street-facing window display at the British Council Gallery; Prague (1996), in a large primarily print-based group exhibition Imprint 93 and other related ephemera at Norwich Art Gallery (1997) and in the group exhibition Newspapers, Tabloids, Journals at Info Centre; London (1998) which is discussed in Chapter 5, on *Inventory*’s engagements with Info Centre.

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79 ‘The first show of material occurred in September 1994 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. This was before the journal was published and many of the exhibits in this first experimental venture provided themes that the journal would touch upon. The second show took place at the Museum of Mankind in London in early 1995. We displayed much less material in a more rigorous way. We were interested in working with objects from the museums collecting and mixing them with our own archive. It enabled us to play off the two collections, making connections between likenesses and incongruities. The show had primarily ethnographic overtones as objects from the museums collection (mass produced objects transformed or customised by users) were contrasted with the urbane pedestrian fragments jettisoned by consume culture. Each had its own peculiar mark left on it through its brief life as a culturally active object. Each object had the indelible sign of cultural biography marked upon it; corned beef tins flattened and intricately painted to decorate rickshaws in Bangladesh, a betting shop pen chewed into an involuntary sculpture a testament to a gamblers anxiety, the decorative shields of the Waghi in Papua New Guinea modelled on the labels of imported “South Pacific Lager” the banknote which at one time in its life had been a gift yet still bears its written inscription.’ Undated draft press release produced prior to Issue 1. Chelsea College of Art Archives.

80 *Inventory*, ‘Cool, Calm, and...’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.4–7, reproduces displays from Prague, SOAS and the Museum of Mankind.









Images: Installation view, Inventory, *Inventory*, installation in three display cabinets at SOAS Library, London, 1994

## Ethnographic Cabinets at SOAS Library

*Inventory*'s eponymous first exhibition, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, comprised three large cabinets or wall mounted vitrines – a form of *wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosity – mounted in the corridor along the hall from the library entrance. A text, entitled, 'For a Sociology', published as the editorial of the first issue, was pinned behind glass as were an enormous amount of images: maps, postcards, vinyl LP covers, administrative forms, passports and other photographs. The display can be understood, in this context, as a provocation to staff and students at SOAS, an educational institution noted for ethnographic research as well as development studies and other related disciplines which take 'foreign' cultures as their object of study. Instead of staging an encounter with the foreign and exotic, *Inventory* sought to estrange the familiar, to force its viewers to *look again*.<sup>81</sup> Under *Inventory*'s 'fiercely sociological' gaze objects in vitrines had become extra-aesthetic, extra-ethnographic, no longer affirmative of stable armatures of cultural difference. Rather than the findings of 'ethnographic' research, the cabinets exhibited at SOAS represented an instantiation of a kind of cargo cult: a hoarding and re-arrangement of objects gleaned from the city, suspended briefly outside of relations of exchange, organised by not-yet knowable principles. As such, this stressed not the object's *usefulness*, nor its former function, but its relations, connections and attachments.<sup>82</sup> Many images exhibited were to appear later as illustrations in the journal. Essays published in the first three issues of the journal: Adam Scrivener, 'Photo Booth', *Inventory*, 'Orpheus Street', Nick Norton, 'A Floating Island', *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', were referenced via their illustrations or reproduced in excerpt or entirety.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the display threaded together the printed page, its openness to reorganisation and the suggestive mobility of the material. By establishing a chance encounter at SOAS, *Inventory* reversed the ethnographic gaze to see how anthropologists would relate and respond to the re-presentation on ethnographic terms of a rich midden from their own culture. The display staged a crisis and estrangement of the ethnographic subject. The ethnographers were to become strangers to themselves.

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81 'The ethnographic [...] suggests here a characteristic attitude of participant observation among the artifacts of a defamiliarized cultural reality. The surrealists attitude, whilst comparable to that of the fieldworker who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to act in the reverse sense, by making the familiar strange [...] generated by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism are two elements.' James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', op. cit., p.542

82 See Annette Michelson, 'Heterology and the Critique of Instrumental Reason', *October* Special Issue, Spring 1986,(1939-40), p.117.

83 Respectively, Adam Scrivener, 'Photo Booth', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.73-79; *Inventory*, 'Orpheus Street', *Ibid.*, pp.4-7); *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', Nick Norton, 'The Floating Island', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995 (both).





Images: (top left) Damian Abbott of *Inventory* holding Smash This... placard at the junction of Hanway Street and Tottenham Court Road, London 1999. Photograph: Max Reeves (with permission) (top right) Miscellaneous *Inventory* posters in situ on Hanway Street (bottom right) Unknown friend of *Inventory* holding Smash This... placard at the junction of Oxford Street and Hanway Street, London 1999 (bottom left) Miscellaneous posters *I.D.* and *Inventory* in situ and torn on ground on Hanway Street. All three photographs by and courtesy of Nick Norton.

## Smash This Puny Existence

Smash This Puny Existence was a project which took the idea of the journal as an open and collective form – a bridge between publishing and the street – literally and seriously. Initiated by *Inventory* as part of a collaboration with arts publisher and commissioning agency Bookworks in 1999, the project took the form of a ‘public newspaper’ pasted to the walls of streets in Glasgow and London during the course of a single day. With the assistance of designers, SecMoCo, *Inventory* produced a number of broadsheet-format poster collages of text and image drawn from their own writings, slogans and those produced for the journal. The London action took place on Hanway Street, which is a small alley that traverses a right angle between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. This coincided with an event called Expo-Destructo 20 March 1999 a ‘post-media flea-market’ and spin-off from the Next Five Minutes conference held in Amsterdam which brought together media and political activists with a specific focus on the relation between ‘the street and the net’.<sup>84</sup> At each entrance to Hanway Street members or friends of the group held a ‘Golf Sale’ signs inciting passers-by to ‘Smash This Puny Existence’ with changeable straplines such as ‘Deviate!’; ‘Fornicate!’; ‘Fabricate!’, and directing them into the street to engage with the temporary newspaper installation. The attempt to directly intervene within a dense commercial and pedestrian thoroughfare was messy and chaotic. *Inventory*’s posters were ripped down as fast as they could be put up and at a few points in the day rival fly-poster gangs, who claimed exclusive rights over such illicit activity, visited threats upon members of the group. The ripped and torn partially legible layered ‘midden’ extant on the wall would not be completely displeasing either to the group, or to admirers of the French avant-garde tradition of *affiche lacérées* art (collages made from posters torn from advertising hoardings). The journal dissolved its pages into the city fabric, its discourse had become aggregated with heterogeneous material forming a polysemous meshwork. A precursor to *Inventory*’s street newspaper was the ‘wall newspaper’ exhibition they collaborated on with two other magazine projects, *Super Umbau* and *Transgressions* at Info Centre in Hackney 25 September–1 November 1998. Where the posters at the Info Centre were distributed free, or sold singularly, displayed as the backdrop for social gatherings, readings and discussion (questionably critical of the early commodification of social relations staged by relational aesthetics) the poster set created for the Hanway Street event were published and sold as an artist’s limited edition by Bookworks.

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84 Expo-Destructo: post-media pressure was a one day event held on 20 March 1999 in London combining a series of talks to celebrate the launch of a new book *'README! ascii culture and the revenge of knowledge'*, and a public gathering of media activists, webzines, artists working in electronic media, troublemakers and plenty others: a ‘post-media flea-market’. <http://bak.spc.org/iod/destructo/>



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fax: + 082 254 112  
e-mail: [inventory@cwcom.net](mailto:inventory@cwcom.net)

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## Inventory Survey Project

In 2009 Inventory, operating as an artistic group, attempted a more sustained initiative designed to bridge the space between the journal and the street. Invited to the Japanese city of Hiroshima for a public art festival the group erected a geodesic dome tent and inhabited it for several days in various public spaces. Using this as a base for exploration of the surrounding city as well as a meeting point for the public the group attempted to ‘survey’ passers-by and the general public, publishing their findings on the outside of the tent and screening videos and interviews as they were shot in situ. In interview with Virginia Nimarkoh, the group drew the situation of the tent into dialogue with the journal: ‘Like the journal, the dome offers the possibility of creating a nomadic, transforming and transformative space. It is a surrogate architecture, which can occupy any situation and organise itself according to the event and surroundings. Places from which to initiate actions, disseminate, exchange and display information. Each project is very much a unique thing not just as a trace or as an after-the-fact document, but as a living operations centre.’<sup>85</sup> This account of the project perhaps best characterises the group’s aspirations for the journal too – each ‘architecture’, journal or dome – enabling quick and spontaneous report between the street and reflection upon it; the possibility of readers or viewers becoming writers or contributors. Reflection upon the Survey Project in the form of a brief report, published as an editorial by Inventory as ‘Without Intent’ (1999).<sup>86</sup> Later, filled in copies of the survey issued were published in the journal *Anonymous*, ‘Inventory Survey Project’.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Indent*, op. cit., p.36.

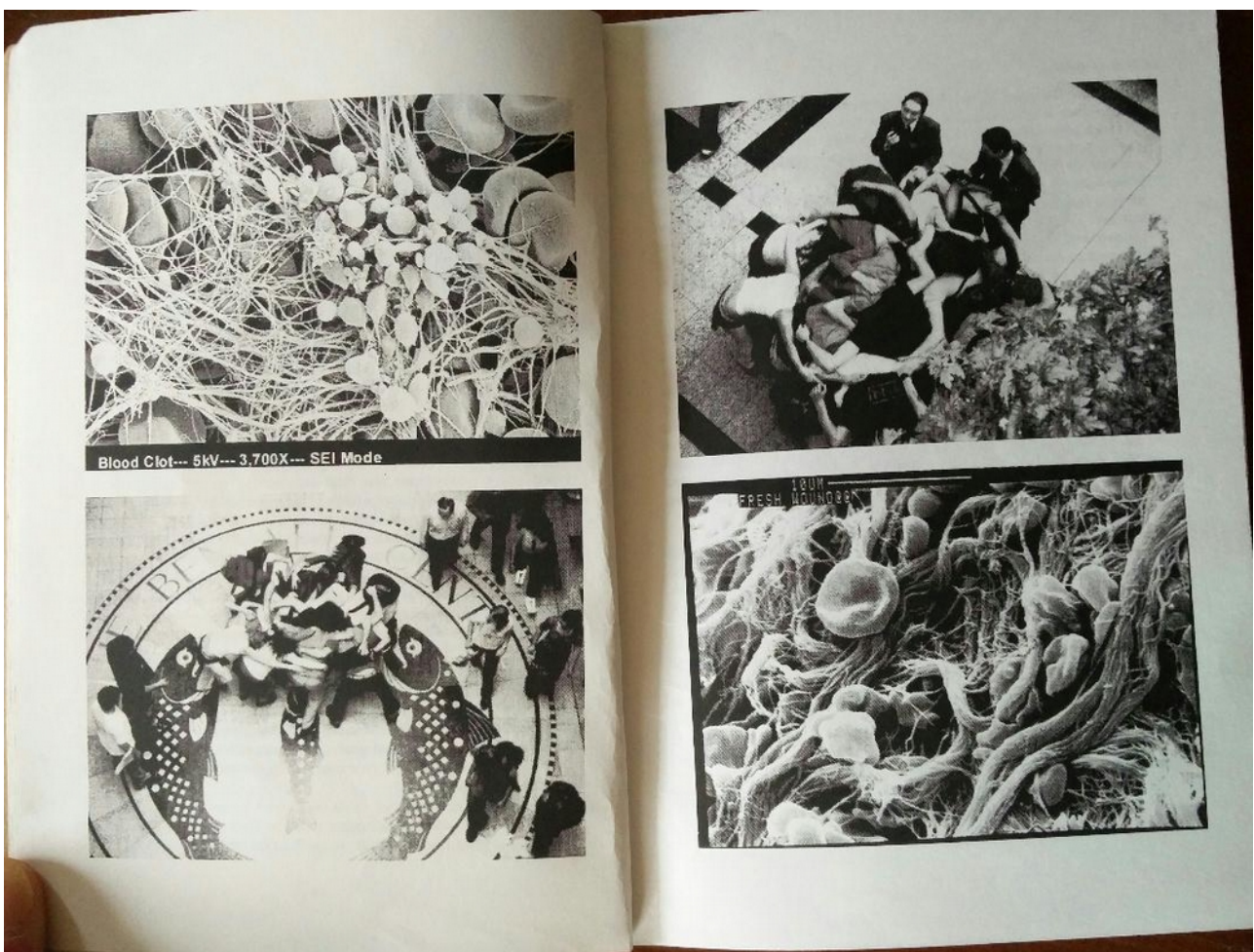
<sup>86</sup> Inventory, ‘Without Intent’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.4–11.

<sup>87</sup> *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.114–123.





Image: Inventory, *Coagulum*, Kingston Shopping Centre, video still (left) and detail (right) 2000



Images: Inventory, *Coagulum*, 2000 from Inventory, *Coagulum*, Inventory, Vol.4, No.1, 2000, pp.8-9

# Coagulum

A more successful, perhaps because still unresolved theoretically or practically, project was the series of actions initiated by the group under the moniker 'Coagulum'. An initial version took place 13 May 2000 in a shopping centre in Kingston, in the context of an exhibition held at the Stanley Picker Gallery at Kingston University. The action took the form of inviting participants to meet at the shopping centre and form an obstruction in 'the form of the rugby scrum although adapted to create a circular formation of bodies rather than the, head to head, conflictual form as it is in the game. A physical as well as symbolic affirmation of collectivity, unity and headlessness.'<sup>88</sup> The action was later repeated on Oxford Street in the busy Christmas shopping period of December 2000 in a number of malls and shops. In this and its later instantiations this action, from some perspectives, merged and became indistinguishable from a then resurgent protest culture which also tended to use both play and direct action to block similar sites of commerce.<sup>89</sup>

It's a brilliant and comic gesture that neatly sums up *Inventory*'s belligerent attitude to the banality of urban living, and sharply exposes the swift intolerance that greets even minor disruptions to civic order. Obstructing the highway is easy enough to do without much theory, but *Coagulum* is both poetic and didactic, the practical expression in embryo of the possibility of collective intervention, into the already present conventions of daily experience.<sup>90</sup>

Whilst the sequence of protests building up to 2001, which steeply declined after September 2001 tended to valorise play as an end in itself, what *Inventory* introduced, in their text and its interaction with practical experiment, albeit brief, was a self-conscious form of temporary minority community-formation and exploration of resistant biologisation from below – the coagulum forming 'a compound being'.<sup>91</sup>

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88 *Inventory*, 'Coagulum', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.4-12, p.5.

89 Mayday 2000 saw skirmishes and mini-riots throughout the commercial centre of London, Soho, Oxford Street and Picadilly Circus. Mayday 2001 was themed 'Mayday Monopoly', <http://libcom.org/library/mayday-2001> [Accessed 4 February, 2016] all shops on Oxford Street were boarded up. An artwork by Jakob Jakobsen, contributor to *Inventory*, publisher of Infopool and organiser of project space Info Centre, was directly inspired by Mayday 2001, 'They Don't Want Our Desires Today', 2001, archived <http://infopool.antipool.org/mayday.htm> [Accessed 20 February, 2001].

90 J.J. Charlesworth, 'Requiem for the Empty Quarter', *Art Monthly*, No.254, March 2002.

91 *Inventory*, Coagulum', *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.1, 2000, pp.4-11, p.11. The biological metaphor of the coagula or clot, is explored at greater length in the text reporting back on the actions, the theme of biologisation and revolt is explored in greater depth and with a great deal of originality in the same issue by *Inventory* member Damian Abbott, 'Extensive Bodies', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.117-131.

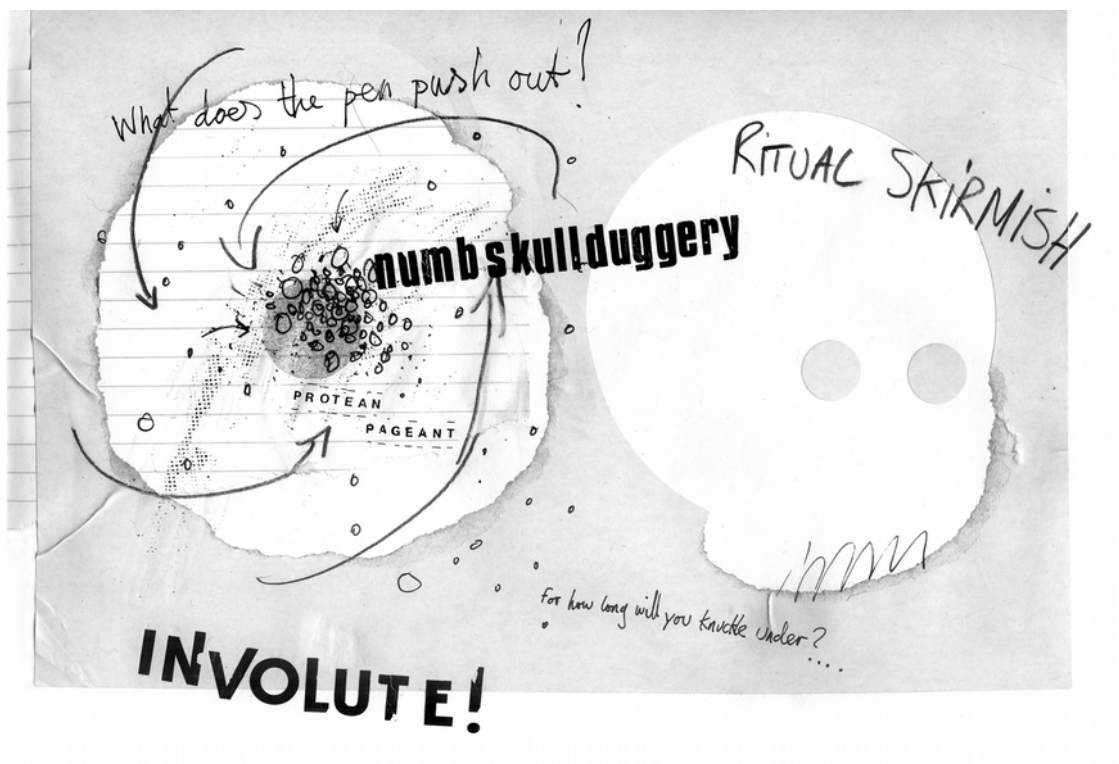


Image: Inventory, Drawing for Coagulum, 2000

# **Chapter 2**

## **Conditions, Models and Precursors for Inventory Journal**

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# Introduction

Following the formal analysis of *Inventory* journal in chapter one, this chapter attempts to illuminate *Inventory*'s context.<sup>1</sup>

The artist-run journal or magazine has a rich history in structuring the mode of practice and international dissemination of a number of artistic and political movements as well as the practices of individual artists and writers of the inter-war avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> During the period leading up to and following the Russian Revolution the international magazine and pamphlet was an essential platform *establishing* these movements as advanced, circulating their innovations and radical views.<sup>3</sup> Artists moved from pre-revolutionary small circulation self-published projects to revolutionary journals, posters, flyers and other publicity, then eventually on to state-directed journals with huge national and international circulation.<sup>4</sup> Writers in the various movements that comprised the Russian avant-garde made graphic and/or written contributions to the publicity articulating the political currents under sway and later journals tended to act as pluralistic platforms in which these varying positions could enter into dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Various formations operating under the rubric of, or in association with, the surrealist movement issued anti-colonial, anti-war, anti-fascist

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1 The previous chapter I more or less pursued the method of analysis proposed by Gwen Allen: 'Magazines demand the same kind of close attention to their form, content, and conditions of production and reception as more traditional works of art. I take into account their materiality as printed objects with an identifiable set of attributes and elements, such as covers, mastheads, bindings, editorial pages, and advertising sections. I pay close attention to factors such as typography and design, format, printing technologies, paper stock, and examine how magazines structure meaning through sequence and juxtaposition.' Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011, p.8.

2 Stephen Bury, *Breaking the Rules: The Printed Face of the European Avant Garde 1900-1937*, London: British Library, 2007.

3 Margit Rowell & Deborah Wye (Eds.), *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934*, New York: Museum of Modern Art: Thames & Hudson: H.N. Abrams, 2002. Indeed the centrality of print to the events leading up to the 1917 Russian Revolution is acknowledged in many accounts: the 1905 general strike was precipitated by the initiative of a St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies formed by striking printers, <https://libcom.org/history/articles/russian-revolution-1905/index.php> [Accessed 30 January 2019]

4 Ibid., p.18.

5 Examples of journals, political tendencies and notable critics, artists or poets contributing to them include the Bolshevik aligned newspapers, *Izvestiia* [News] and *Pravda* [Truth], Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Brik and Lili Brik), the Social Revolutionary aligned *Znamia truda* [The banner of work] (Viktor Shklovsky), Anarchist, *Anarkhiia* [Anarchy] (David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich) and also Conservative Revolutionary (Roman Jakobsen) tendencies), later journals *Lef* [Left Front] and *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the commune] tended to act as pluralistic left platforms in which these varying positions could enter into dialogue. After Lenin's demise architectural journals such as *Artists' Brigade* and *USSR in Construction* tended to commission lavish colour contributions by survivors of the artistic avant-garde but were international propaganda vehicles for the Bolshevik state rather than artist-run organs of internal debate, criticism and self-understanding, as the above listed journals had been to respectively varying degrees. Christina Loader, 'Art of the Commune', *Art Journal* Vol.52, No.1, 7 May 2014, pp.24-33.

and revolutionary tracts.<sup>6</sup> The significance of small print runs and journals in terms of the functions they served anarchist, communist and fascist movements in this period are no less important and recent surveys of material from this time increasingly tend to place these materials, and the figures within them who collaborated across the disciplinary fields now understood to be separate, into dialogue.<sup>7</sup> My contention is that this field of associated avant-garde, political and popular publicity or *printed matter* was the distributed landscape through which *Inventory* came to understand magazines and publications as interlocking cultural fields where forms of political articulation, knowledge, representations and imagery circulated and clashed, with the journal centrally placed as an organising core anchoring particular debates, sensibilities and cultural formations.<sup>8</sup>

The inter-war period was not the only era in which the magazine occupied a central position in artists' work, as well as facilitating its distribution and appreciation. In the 1960s not only was the artist-run magazine revived, but artists began (again) to devise works which would infiltrate the organs of art criticism. Gwen Allen argues that such was the 'unprecedented authority of the magazine in the art world at this moment', that key cultural battles launched by artists throughout the 1960s and 1970s involved convergent forms of takeover of this crucial space.<sup>9</sup> Artists began challenging the arbiters of taste by writing and publishing criticism themselves. They also began publishing pieces made specifically for the magazine page, either legitimately through commission, with tacit, or without, approval of the publishers, through the use of advertising, and they began their own magazines and journals sometimes transforming these into works themselves.<sup>10</sup> Whilst the form of content experimented with as 'insertions' by artists in art magazines is a significant precursor to some experimental work presented in *Inventory*, and by *Inventory* in other publications, most relevant to my presentation of *Inventory* here, as constituting a sustained practice of self-publishing and dialogue, are the examples of artist-run magazines (such as *Art-Language*,

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6 An excellent recent study of the work of Karl Einstein and the political and philosophical stakes surrounding *Documents* journal (1929-1930) contains a useful capsule account of the surrealists' anti-colonialism. Irene Albers, 'The Anti-Colonialism of the Surrealists', in Anselm Franke & Tom Holert, (Eds.), *Neolithic Childhood, Art in a False Present, c. 1930*. Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt; Diaphanes, 2018, pp.244-247. Two anthologies which exhibit the very much global dissemination of political texts by surrealists were published in the 1990s and 2000s, notably by *Inventory* contributors, Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski (Eds. and Trans.) *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2001 and *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. London; New York: Verso, 1996.

7 This format was established by the exhibition, *The Russian Avant-garde Book*, at The Museum of Modern Art 1910-1934, March 28-May 21, 2002 which was continued in the recent exhibition, *Red Star Over Russia A revolution in visual culture 1905-55*, Tate Modern, 8 November 2017 – 18 February 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/red-star-over-russia>

8 Cf. The journals *La Révolution Surréaliste*, *Documents* and *La Critique Sociale* which I survey below.

9 Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011, p.13.

10 See Ibid and Gwen Allen (Ed.), *The Magazine*, London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016.

and *The Fox*) from the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in a much broader cultural movement, as much literary as artistic, when the Soviet Union and the chimera of ‘really existing socialism’ began to collapse in the late-1980s ‘spontaneous practices of self-publishing’ emerged to vie for and reorganise the ‘scriptural economy’ and presuppositions of what a text or an author could be.<sup>12</sup> It deserves to be considered carefully how the new abilities that this epochal change facilitated – to reimagine both the legacies of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde and the post-revolutionary eruption of *samizdat* publishing – indicate changes in global conceptions of what (molar or molecular) ‘media’ or ‘community’ could be, consequently impacting upon *Inventory*’s approaches to publishing.<sup>13</sup> We will see shortly how *Inventory* themselves addressed this post-Socialist state in their statements about publishing.

My initial argument here is that, within what can be understood as a very broad field of artists’ publishing, the principle models of the journal for *Inventory* were those most historically remote, such as *Documents* and *La Révolution Surréaliste*. But in order to understand why these models were chosen and what their significance was for *Inventory*, it is necessary to appreciate the context of artists publishing both preceding and contemporary with *Inventory*. This chapter therefore presents a complex field of cultural influences (surrealism, conceptual art, modernist and postmodernist anthropology, sociology, political philosophy and cultural theory) which can be positioned as areas from which *Inventory* drew elements and insights, and which they transformed in order to develop a publishing practice, a research method, formal archetypes and techniques for producing texts and works, as well as critical insights about late-20th century culture and society.

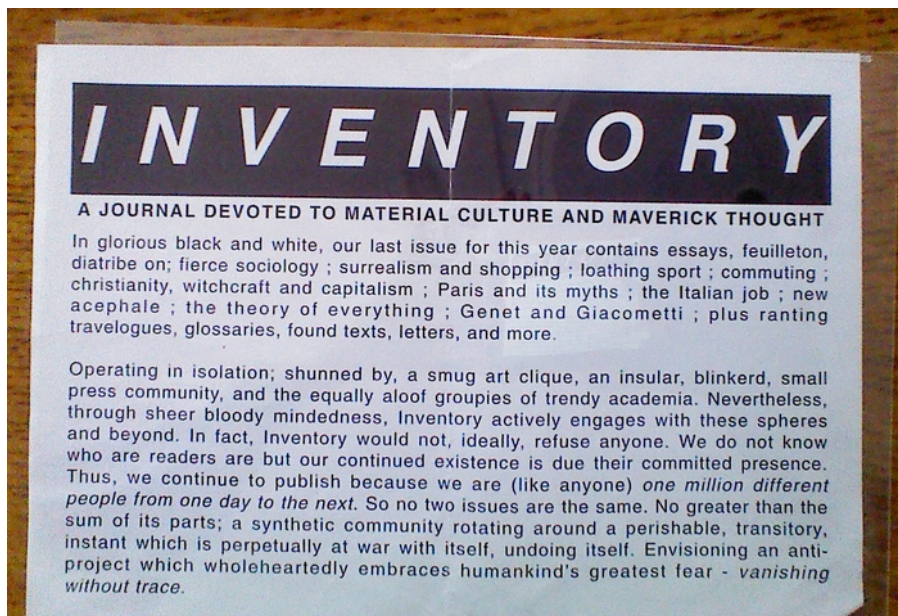
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11 *Inventory* published criticism, visual and written projects in other magazines and anthologies, most notable here would be the artists’ projects inserts published in *Everything Magazine* and *The Mule* (both serial projects self-published by artists) and the group-authored documentary fiction written for *Frozen Tears* (an anthology of transgressive writing by artists and writers, notably including Art & Language, Georges Bataille, CCRU and *Inventory* contributor John Cussans) and Adam Scrivener’s criticism for *Untitled* (c. 1997-2000), *Inventory*, ‘Insert (Hiroshima Questionnaire)’, *Everything Magazine*, Issue 3.1, 1999, pp.9-10 and *Inventory*, ‘Newspaper project’, *The Mule*, 31 October, 1997, p.9, *Inventory*, ‘Exquisite Corpse’, John Russell, (Ed.), *Frozen Tears*, Birmingham: ARTicle Press, University of Central England, 2003, pp.703-716.

12 I argue elsewhere in this study that the collapse of the Soviet Union was very much a determining historical marker for *Inventory*, in this chapter I explore in passing the legacy both of the Russian Revolution and the demise of the system it brought to power in terms of both events’ impact on publishing. Valentina Parisi, ‘Scribes, Self-Publishers, Artists: Performing the Book in the Samizdat Writing Scene’, in Annette Gilbert, and Hannes Bajohr (Eds.), *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Berlin & New York: Sternberg Press, 2016, pp.154-169.

13 Two essays in the journal contain reflections upon *Inventory*’s post-socialist condition Paul Claydon, ‘Three Essays on the Task of Mourning’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.6-13, pp.9-10 and Simon Neville, ‘Let Her Sons Weep...’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.42-45, p.45. This shall come to further importance when I develop the treatment of publishing here in Chapter 4 in terms of a media analysis and a periodisation which addresses *Inventory* as part of the ‘post-media era’. The post-socialist imaginary here is then very much symptomatic of the period *Inventory* were working through.

In this chapter I first establish relationships between publishing, publicity and the public sphere drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas, then describe some concrete approaches to the field of publishing studies, journal studies, artists' writing and artist's publishing before going on to develop how their negotiation of specific models allowed *Inventory* to develop approaches which were anomalous to and distinct from the field of artists' publications surrounding them and indicate how *Inventory* drew from these to devise original approaches to the problems of artistic practice and publishing.



Inventory Journal flyer for Vol.2 No.3, 1997 (Mayday Archives)



Image: Brochure publicising subscriptions to *Inventory* journal, c.1996 (May Day Rooms Archives)

# Public Sphere, Publicity, Publishing and Printed Matter

Publishing, and therefore artists' publishing, has often been discussed on the terms established by Jürgen Habermas' concept of 'publicity', which links publishing and readership to the bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century and the emergence of spaces of readership, discussion and political articulation.<sup>14</sup> This conjunction of media, spatial arrangements and social consensus, according to Habermas and others, established the 'conduct of debate, as if among equals' – which 'became the ground of democratic, antiabsolutist politics' building the social ties, ideals and institutions which supported the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere.<sup>15</sup> Frazer Ward describes how, within Habermas' argument, 'the institution of art is intimately, structurally involved in the construction of the subject of democratic oppositional politics.'<sup>16</sup> Gwen Allen develops this in a direction which will have far-reaching significances in this chapter, because according to her Habermas describes how,

the innumerable pamphlets criticizing or defending the leading theory of art built on the discussions of the salons and reacted back on them art criticism as conversation' This interplay between printed criticism and spoken language was key to how art criticism distinguished itself from its elitist predecessor, connoisseurship, since, unlike the latter, art criticism was not intended to impose the critic's opinion on the viewer, but to encourage the viewer's own critical judgment.<sup>17</sup>

This relation between art, publishing and critical judgement is of a major significance to *Inventory's* pursuit of publishing as a platform of socio-political enquiry, self-organisation, creative activity and reflection. I shall argue, in this chapter and those that follow, that *Inventory* involved itself very self-

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14 Annette Gilbert & Hannes Bajohr (Eds.), *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Berlin & New York: Sternberg Press, 2016; Frazer Ward, 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', *October* 73 (Summer 1995): pp.71–89, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, op. cit. and *The Magazine*, op. cit. Nicholas Thoburn does not engage Habermas by name, but his subversive model of a 'communism of printed matter' is constructed with precise opposition to and subversion of the 'bourgeois public sphere' celebrated and institutionalised by Habermas, see Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016, see my review Anthony Iles, 'Revolutionary Leaflets and Comrade Things'. *Mute / Metamute*, 22 March 2018, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/revolutionary-leaflets-and-comrade-things> [Accessed 2 February, 2018].

15 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', op. cit., p.74.

16 Ibid.

17 *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, op. cit. p.16.

consciously in ‘the construction of the subject of democratic oppositional politics.’<sup>18</sup> And this will be developed through several facets of the group’s activity, however... it suggests an entirely different relation between publication and public than that proffered by Habermas.<sup>19</sup> Indeed as ‘a journal that is not constrained by subject matter or by the sterile conventions of publishing’, *Inventory*’s model engages a general model of publicity and publishing but ultimately in order to differentiate itself.<sup>20</sup>

## A Proletarian or Counter-Public Sphere

If, according to Habermas, the spaces offered up by the advent of publishing and publicity resulted in the birth of the exercise of critical judgement, free expression of opinion and therefore the key site from which communication of reason between emergent subjects arose, publishing, in turn, structures the sphere in which democratic thought and enunciations circulate, gain approval and are transformed into political action or policy. The bourgeois public sphere is dependent on print for its subject’s formation, the faculty of judgement, enunciation and the ‘validity’ of those judgements and enunciations and their legibility by other subjects.<sup>21</sup> The public is made and renewed by the actions of making, contributing to and reading publicity and publications.

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18 ‘The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity’, op. cit., p.74

19 This is introduced initially here and later explored in my account of *Inventory*’s method and further through the scene of experimental cultural and political publishers *Inventory* encountered grouped at Info Centre in Chapter 6. Later on I offer some insights into Habermas’ theory of modernity and its place in his system and how it poses itself as an opponent to approaches to modernity developed by key influences on *Inventory* and which were developed by a number of contributions to the journal. These have an epistemological significance which regulates not only the form but the content of *Inventory* as a journal. Furthermore, as shall be argued in Chapter 3 where I develop the philosophical orientations of *Inventory*, Habermas represents a specific model of the polis and a particular revision of the critical theory tradition which *Inventory* implicitly rejected through their divagating methodology. A central exchange under discussion in Chapter 3 is that which took place between Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, however Habermas’ becomes significant as a figure in two ways. Firstly, because in Anglo-Germanic sociology and philosophy of the 1990s Habermas was understood to be the successor to that tradition, therefore *Inventory*’s recovery of this debate and their application of it’s interpretation is an implicit rejection of the direction Habermas was directing critical theory in. Secondly, the key influence of Georges Bataille and his milieu, which is also discussed in this chapter, strongly informs *Inventory*’s development of a methodology, but in the late-1990s Habermas developed a strong critique of Bataille’s legacy, address of this critique and a second rejection of Habermas is therefore required.

20 ‘Evacuate London!’ Press Release for *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001. Single printed A4 sheet, Chelsea College of Art Archives.

21 The key issue of ‘validity’ in Habermas’ neo-Kantianism becomes crucial to my exploration of *Inventory*’s methodological experiments in Chapter 3. The issue is explored in Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, London: Verso, 2009, pp.32-39 and Deborah Cook, ‘The Talking Cure in Habermas’s Republic’, *New Left Review*, No.12, December 2001, pp.135-151.



However, this public is necessarily exclusionary. With reference to Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge's powerful critique of Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Frazer Ward, Gwen Allen and others criticise the 'the dominant universal, homogenous public sphere described by Habermas'.<sup>22</sup> The bourgeois public sphere is, according to Ward, 'an idealized abstraction from the actually existing political cultures of Western Europe', it suits to reproduce a bourgeois subject who is property-owning, ideal, disembodied and male.<sup>23</sup> These idealisations are indeed operative to the structuring of public life and the exclusions its operations entail, in this sense they are both true and false – they describe real abstractions which democratic states mobilise for their legitimacy – lies which have legal force (and truth) over those who have a part in, and those who have no part, nor agency over, its operations. Kluge & Negt emphasise how 'the public sphere [...] conceals the actual social structure of production and, above all, the history of the development of its institutions.'<sup>24</sup> Kluge & Negt's critique is primarily negative, they criticise the illusory homogeneity of Habermas' public sphere but also what it disguises, in contradistinction and dynamic struggle with the bourgeois public sphere they demarcate a 'proletarian public sphere' which is 'blocked' and non-existent because '[t]he worker is unable to conceive of the totality of society without finding himself in the bourgeois camp.'<sup>25</sup> Instead, Kluge & Negt propose an antagonistic 'counterpublic sphere' which is as much an imaginary category as it is a real possibility latent in the struggle between bourgeois and proletarian public spheres. Habermas acknowledges these critiques and the possibility of 'the coexistence of competing public spheres' but ultimately resists the 'pluralisation' of his model and even argues that examples of working class mass movements, which by no means limited themselves to democratic action, such as the Chartist movement contributed to the public sphere's 'refeudalization' in capitalist modernity.<sup>26</sup> Through their emphasis upon the existing constraints upon writing and publishing and expression of antagonism *Inventory* can be understood to relate their model of publishing to this antagonistic 'counterpublic sphere'. Against the harmonious 'public' sphere of agreement and negotiation, they characterise their relationship to readers as one of autonomy and individual sovereignty: '[w]e need nor require your approval or criticism – we only ask you to think

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22 *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, op. cit., p.40.

23 'The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity', p.75.

24 Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.1.

25 *Public Sphere and Experience*, op. cit., p.61. Problematically, Kluge & Negt seem to see this as a matter of consciousness, not a material state driven by capital's arrangement of the world and the subjects in it, and this is actually in a continuum with aspects of the neo-Kantian Marxism with which Habermas also identifies. Again, see *Hegel Contra Sociology*, op. cit., pp.32-39.

26 Jürgen Habermas, quoted in James Holstun, *Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*, London: Verso, 2002, p.112 and p.111 respectively.

for yourselves.’<sup>27</sup> We will first complexify the historical interpretation of Habermas’ public sphere before moving onto more closely specifying *Inventory*’s relationship to its readers (and writers).

## Counterpublics and Competing Forms of Publicity

The reception of Kluge & Negt’s and other’s critiques within the arts have tended to emphasise how, in building a robust picture of the public sphere, Habermas ‘ignored the existence of competing forms of publicity – plebian or proletarian – grounded in different communicative practices.’<sup>28</sup> They therefore tend to emphasise how artistic media experiments have amounted to ‘counterproductions’ in themselves. Nancy Fraser claims that there were ‘virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public sphere [...] a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working class publics.’<sup>29</sup> American commentators interpreting this debate have tended to develop ameliorative accounts by which the homogeneity of Habermas’ public sphere was and is always being challenged and diversified by ‘competing counterpublics’.<sup>30</sup> Gwen Allen, for example, describes artist’s various interventions into magazine publishing in the 1960s and 1970s as ‘attempts albeit tactical and short-lived ones to wrest from the spectacular publicity function of the art magazine a different kind of communication.’<sup>31</sup> What these accounts do not provide is a convincing account of how ‘competing counterpublics’ transformed their enunciation and readerhip into political action.<sup>32</sup> If this view remains relevant to *Inventory* – not only on the basis we may judge them, and in doing so bring them into dialogue with the practices Allen surveys, but also on the basis they may have judged themselves – I maintain that a more sensitive account of Kluge & Negt’s theory is necessary. As Kluge & Negt insist, ‘[t]he proletarian public sphere is itself a matter of the future’.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, bearing in mind the utility of Habermas’ treatment of ‘communicative media and institutions as historical media in their own right’, I focus attention towards the ways that *Inventory*’s practice develops a promising failure within the structural logic of a declining bourgeois public sphere and

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27 ‘Evacuate London!’, Press Release for *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001, op. cit.

28 ‘The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity’, p.76.

29 Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’ in Craig Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, pp.109-142, p.116

30 ‘Foreword’, *Public Sphere and Experience*, op. cit., p.xxviii.

31 *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, op. cit., p.40.

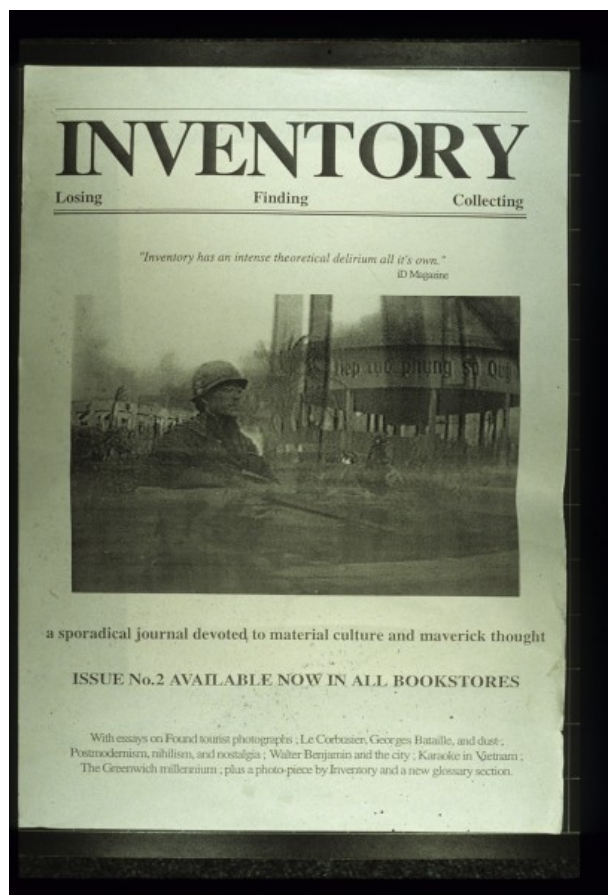
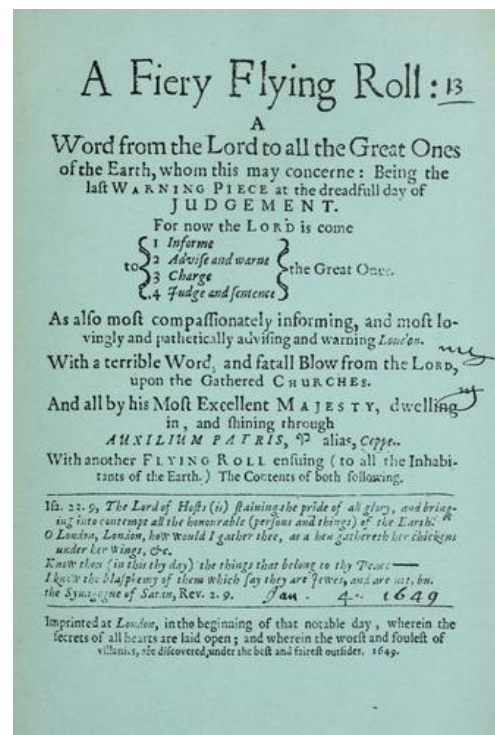
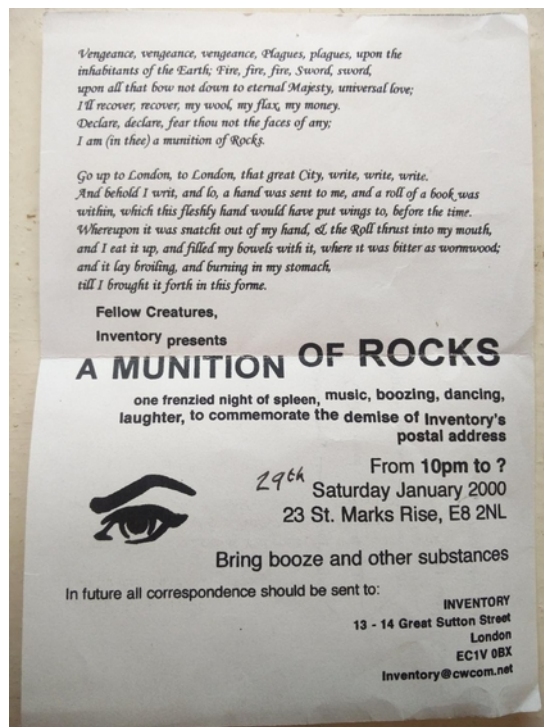
32 This then poses a political problem which will be only skirted here in order to be fully addressed in Chapter 4.

33 *Public Sphere and Experience*, op. cit., FN.41 p.80

prefigures, or agitates for, a proletarian, or counterpublic, sphere whose passage into full realisation remains blocked.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*, op. cit., p.109.



Images: (top left) Inventory, 'A Munition of Rocks', invitation to private party for *Inventory* contributors, London, 29 January, 2000 (single sheet paper flyer 10 x 5cm approx). (top right) Cover Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649) (bottom) Flyer for *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2, 1995

# Historicisation of the Public Sphere

Today occasions for identification have to be created – the public sphere has to be ‘made’, it is not ‘there’ anymore. Altmann calls this [...] the act of ‘communification.’<sup>35</sup>

In the late-20th century Habermas’ saw the public sphere, shrinking and or disintegrating. We can observe, as Nancy Fraser and others have emphasised, that the origin of the bourgeois public sphere was always contingent on the exclusion of other bodies, female, non-white, non-property-owning. On the other hand, or in addition, we can understand the demise of the public sphere as requiring the intensification of these patterns of exclusion through its unsustainability as a universalist principle. According to James Holstun,

The primary structural transformation Habermas sees in the degraded realm of contemporary mass culture was not so much an exclusion as an incorporative, degrading expansion, which transformed the open formation of public opinion into the managed neo-feudal practice of public relations, mass communications, and the manufacture of consent.<sup>36</sup>

Thus rather than seeing the present attenuation of democracy as an outgrowth of the bourgeois public sphere, secularisation, commodification or simply the untenability of capitalism’s ability to reproduce the whole of humanity, Habermas sees it as a perversion, related to the emergence of mass culture and post-modernism.<sup>37</sup> Yet central to *Inventory*’s theoretical and pragmatic explorations through the medium of publishing and publicity is the contention that neither mass culture nor commodification can overcome human expressivity or its search for both community and communication.<sup>38</sup> Their historical understanding did not construe these as purely transhistorical

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35 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, op. cit., p.201.

36 James Holstun, *Ehud’s Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*. London: Verso, 2002, pp.108-109.

37 See Jürgen Habermas, ‘Modernity – an Incomplete Project’, in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New York: New Press, 2002, pp.3-15 and Jürgen Habermas, ‘The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille between Eroticism and General Economics’, (Trans.) Frederick Lawrence, *New German Critique*, No. 33, Modernity and Postmodernity (Autumn, 1984), pp.79-102.

38 ‘The construction of an identity can no longer be perceived as a ‘politic’. In fact this was always something of a misnomer. Rather it is some sort of ridiculously alienated and alienating game. It’s a pseudo conflict that lets the oppressor off the hook and condemns the alienated to their corner.’ ‘Press Release for Inventory, Vol.3 No.2’ undated, c.1999. Chelsea College of Art Archives.

invariants, but rather situated them within a dynamic struggle with wholly historical forces of their suppression.<sup>39</sup>

For *Inventory*, what composes the questionably ‘counterpublic’ sphere can be complexified in several linked directions. Firstly, *Inventory*’s understanding of its own context was shaped by the significance of the earlier bourgeois revolution in England first taking root in the English Revolution 1642-1660 a period of dramatic transformation and class struggle to which publicity was central.<sup>40</sup> This period pre-dates Habermas’ focus on the emergence of the public sphere in the 18-19th century and complexifies its picture of a ‘structural transformation’ in light of the mixture of pre-modern and modern, or political and pre-political forums of public debate which composed it.<sup>41</sup> James Holstun makes claim to the existence of a ‘revolutionary English public sphere’ during this period based on the transformation in the scale, ambition and mode of address expressed in print where print became ‘a medium more of *association* than of hierarchical *appeal*.’<sup>42</sup> This understanding of print as a medium of *association* – lateral connection rather than vertical connection to a superior – is, I shall argue throughout my study, crucial to understanding *Inventory* and their belief in an anti-hierarchical thrust to associating with each other and with a public through publishing.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, I claim that it is the study of the English revolution *as a lost or failed revolution* which oriented *Inventory* practice to a principle of ‘heresy’ against hierarchies, and it is this, and many other, associations with earlier periods which pits them as critics of capitalist modernity – indeed as heretics of a false present – against the exclusionary progressive model of modernity proposed by Habermas.<sup>44</sup> *Inventory* drew extensively on this period’s legacy, both in

39 Thus, in London and globally in the early-21st century we witness in the present the growth and expansion of private enclaves of wealth, yet these superficially reproduce the representation, if not the reality, of the ideal bourgeois public sphere (reading in public, ‘public squares’, public ‘art’, coffee shops, trade, liberal debate). The proliferations of these hollow representations parallel the growth of grey zones or non-places of finance. Both phenomena: finance and privatisation were of interest to *Inventory* and are explored most directly in their urban studies discussed in Chapter 7.

40 Here I am indebted to two highly commendable accounts which each emphasise the historical intermeshing of publishing, radical thought and class in social transformation in this period. The first, was a profound influence on *Inventory* and a whole generation of UK-based artists and small publishers, Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, London etc.: Penguin books, 1991 and the second provides a deepening of Hill’s approach through engagement with late-20th century political theory, including Habermas’, James Holstun, *Ehud’s Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*, London: Verso, 2002, p.109.

41 *Ehud’s Dagger*, op. cit., pp.109-112.

42 Ibid.

43 ‘The production of knowledge without a patron has been described as apocalyptic in its historical implications.’ Susan Buck-Morss, ‘The Gift of the Past’ in Emily Jacir and Susan Buck-Morss, *Emily Jacir & Susan Buck-Morss: The Gift of the Past / Das Der Vergangenheit*, 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011, p.36.

44 *Inventory* discuss their choice of the essay as the central format ‘whose innermost formal law is heresy’ for their work in ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, op. cit., p.6. Lateral connection to a body rather than vertical connection to a superior ‘head’ – is, I shall argue throughout my study, crucial to understanding *Inventory* and their belief in an anti-hierarchical thrust to associating with each other and with a public through publishing. This may at first seem an obscure distinction, but if we consider the impact of the English Revolution on not only public life but

terms of canny references in text and performance works, but also in the self-conceptions of the forms their writing took as well as their own status as latter day ranters or dissenters.<sup>45</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood summarises this historical problematic, which has complex ramifications not only for theories of history and the British state, but also of modernity and specifically capitalist modernity: ‘Britain, these arguments run, suffers from an incomplete modernization, a stunted economic development hindered by antiquated institutions and cultural attitudes, anachronisms which have remained tenaciously in place since the early – too early – emergence of English capitalism.’<sup>46</sup> The unresolved, or contested, content of the English Revolution had a determining influence on *Inventory*’s publishing model, organising practices and political analysis.<sup>47</sup>

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the very formation of the modern State in the United Kingdom we will understand that the missed opportunity of the English Revolution was, for *Inventory*, constitutive of the historical rise of a peculiar form of class domination – its structuring of things and appearances – which citizens and non-citizens living in the UK continue to suffer under today, and which masks what might have been otherwise. Though Habermas’ model is arguably also horizontal and associative it remains bounded by bourgeois subjecthood, whose limit is within those who can own and retain property, this limit was temporarily breached during the English Revolution, the articulations at the Putney Debates make this clear – what was demanded by the commoners was representation without property (interest), what was settled upon was representation only for those with ‘an interest in the land’ i.e. ownership of it. (Cf. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, London: Penguin books, 1991 and Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*, London & New York: Verso Books, 2016.

- 45 Direct allusions to peasant revolts, popular riots and the beheading of the English King are made in Kingsland Passage, ‘The Last Days of London’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.72-73; the street actions *Coagulum* (Kingston Shopping Mall, 2000 and Oxford Street 2001) and *Mass Football on the Mall*. The publicity circulated around these events deliberately drew on the history of enclosure, religious and political dissent and self-publishing which were the incendiary elements in the English Revolution. A late documentary film work featured contemporary amateur enthusiasts preparing for the re-enactment of a significant battle of the English Civil War. *Inventory*’s contribution to *Space Cooks*, a curated anthology of artists’ ‘recipes’ riffs on Abiezer Coppe’s 1649 pamphlet, ‘A Flying Feiry Roll’, in Abiezer Coppe, *Selected Writings*, (Ed.) Andrew Hopton. 1987, Aporia Press, London. A flyer made for a private party ‘to commemorate the demise of *Inventory*’s postal address’ in January 2000 for *Inventory*’s contributors, addressed as ‘fellow creatures’, features an extensive quotation from Coppe’s major work, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649).
- 46 Ellen Meiksins Wood, ‘The Peculiarities of the English and the Decline of Britain -- Ellen Meiksins Wood on the Nairn-Anderson Thesis and the Bourgeois Paradigm’, extract from *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*, London & New York: Verso Books, 2016, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2310-the-peculiarities-of-the-english-and-the-decline-of-britain-ellen-meiksins-wood-on-the-nairn-anderson-thesis-and-the-bourgeois-paradigm> [Accessed 13 October, 2018]
- 47 To name this period of rupture in English history the ‘English Revolution’ rather than the ‘English Civil War’ or ‘Interregnum’ is to take a stand clearly on one side of a polemical debate which has divided conservatives and progressives over competing accounts of the development of capitalism, monarchy, parliamentary democracy and the modern State in the British Isles. For two typical opposing accounts Cf. David Underdown, *Pride’s Purge*. Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1971 and Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, London: Penguin books, 1991. Furthermore debates over this period have also structured early theories of socialism and communism, cf. Eduard Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism: Socialism and Democracy in the Great English Revolution*, (Trans. H. J. Stenning), New York: Schocken Books, (1895), 1963. *Inventory* I shall argue, founded their outlook activity upon an understanding of this moment as containing an unfinished revolution within the revolution, they understood this historic class struggle repressed by structure of English democracy and constitutional monarchy as therefore ongoing and unresolved, and they understood printed matter and self-publishing as central to such ruptures in the polity, then and now. The two positions which represent mine and those which I ascribe to *Inventory* are best represented by the work of Christopher Hill: ‘There were, we may oversimplify, two revolutions in mid-seventeenth century England. The one which succeeded in establishing the sacred rights of property (abolition of feudal tenures, no arbitrary taxation), gave political power to the propertied (sovereignty of Parliament and common law, abolition of prerogative courts), and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property – the protestant ethic. There was, however, another revolution which



Secondly, an acknowledged but underdiscussed element of the formation of the ‘public sphere’ is its origin in clandestine and secret networks with which the public sphere emerged. Habermas accepts an earlier historical stage in which ‘the rational communication of a public consisting of cultivated human beings itself needed to be protected from becoming public because it was a threat to any and all relations of domination’, but precludes any necessary return to clandestine organisation even under self-evident conditions of domination and repression.<sup>48</sup> As Miranda Joseph has pointed out, Habermas’ apparently universal reason turns out to be ‘marked by the particular interests of a dominant group; thus, those who are different from that norm will be disabled in their participation’.<sup>49</sup> This has a direct impact on the *communifying* agency of Habermas’ ‘communicative reason’, since publishing and publicity communicates, but what it communicates is not necessarily the *ideal* community of the liberal state. Rather communication communicates a potential for community, one that by necessity is constitutive and potential, not arrived at as a foregone conclusion or institutional formation: ‘we have nothing to convince you of; one begins to speak and throws open the possibility of a fall, of error, of the unexpected – of a dialogue.’<sup>50</sup> This goes to the heart of the historical and contingent nature of Habermas’ public sphere. In opposition to it, *Inventory* adopted, and attempted to proliferate, fugitive, ephemeral and anonymous modes of publishing (including illegal acts such as flyposting, pirate radio broadcasts and illicit printing). Moreover, I argue that the problematic of the public sphere influenced *Inventory* journal’s embodiment of the historical and contingent of experience, the ‘fear [of] vanishing without a trace’ and the actual practice of running a journal and dissolving it in advance of its institutionalisation.<sup>51</sup> For *Inventory* commodification ruins experience, but things might be/have been different. Another subject might have or might yet take the lead and inject contingency into historical phenomena, to ‘read what was never written’ as Walter Benjamin phrased it, or to be ‘*nobody* and *nothing*’ – to take up and articulate a position that has not yet existed or been legible on the map of social forms – as *Inventory* admonish us in their most recent work.<sup>52</sup>

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never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.’ *The World Turned Upside Down*, op. cit., p.15; and latterly James Holstun: ‘I argue that the radical praxis of working people played a crucial role in the English Revolution, the first capitalist and anti-capitalist revolution, and that it can help us better understand that struggle and the struggles of our own time.’ James Holstun, *Ehud’s Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*. London: Verso, 2002, p.ix.

48 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, op. cit., p.35.

49 Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, pp.xxi-xxii.

50 ‘Press Release for *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2’ undated, c.1999. Chelsea College of Art Archives.

51 Quote from ‘*Inventory: A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO MATERIAL CULTURE AND MAVERICK THOUGHT*’ undated draft press release, c.1995. Chelsea College of Art Archives.

52 *Inventory, The Counsel of Spent*, London: Bookworks, 2018, pp.59-62 and pp.112-113.

In this same text *Inventory* argue, after Georges Bataille, that the value of knowledge,

depends on its ability to make any conclusive image of the universe impossible.

Knowledge destroys fixed notions and this continuing destruction is its greatness, or more precisely, its truth.<sup>53</sup>

Bataille grasped a different enlightenment – '[w]hen reason seemed the most to assert her rights' – one completely opposed to the dignified ideal celebrated by Habermas and instead motored by the force of critique and the violent material destruction of aristocratic rulers and their symbols.<sup>54</sup> This destructive character of knowledge – what *Inventory* called, echoing Bataille, 'the sovereign destructive character of life' – has wide ranging implications for the restless system *Inventory* developed through their method.<sup>55</sup> Refusal and resistance, including textual and verbal communication, were, for *Inventory*, constitutive of fleeting forms of meaningful sovereignty and community. I argue that a search for 'sovereignty', for *Inventory*, applied as much to writing and publishing as to projected political or spiritual states, and that this way of conceptualising the limits and boundaries of experience and practical action seeks to displace the ameliorations of the 'public sphere' with more vigorous and unstable forms of communication and community. Habermas' model is implicitly questioned and rejected on the basis of *Inventory*'s challenge to the *objectivity* of bourgeois science and bourgeois subjecthood. The separability of the subject of judgement from the phenomena over which judgement is cast is disputed by *Inventory* in terms of the method it attempted to bring into practice and at the level of the presentation of the journal to its readers.<sup>56</sup> This is an impasse *Inventory* sought to overcome by attempting instead to identify and study social facts in ways that reached beyond a stable conservative accounts of subject/object relations.

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53 Georges Bataille, *Guilty*, (Trans. Bruce Boone), Venice, Calif.: Lapis Press, 1988, p.25, quoted in *The Counsel of Spent*, op. cit., p.7. See also footnote 52.

54 'times, / In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways / Of custom, law, and statute, took at once / The attraction of a country in romance! / When reason seemed the most to assert her rights, / When most intent on making of herself / A prime enchantress – to assist the work / Which then was going forward in her name! / Not favoured spots alone, but the whole earth,' William Wordsworth, 'The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement', <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45518/the-french-revolution-as-it-appeared-to-enthusiasts-at-its-commencement> [Accessed, 14 September, 2018].

55 *Inventory*, 'Inventory: Cool, Calm and...', *Inventory*, Vol.2, No.2, pp.4-7, p.4. Destruction as a condition of the new and of new knowledge chimes with the dialectical themes explored by Benjamin and Adorno which I discuss in Chapter 3.

56 Numerous statements throughout the journal substantiate this view, but perhaps the most coherent is that of *Inventory*'s final editorial, *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13.

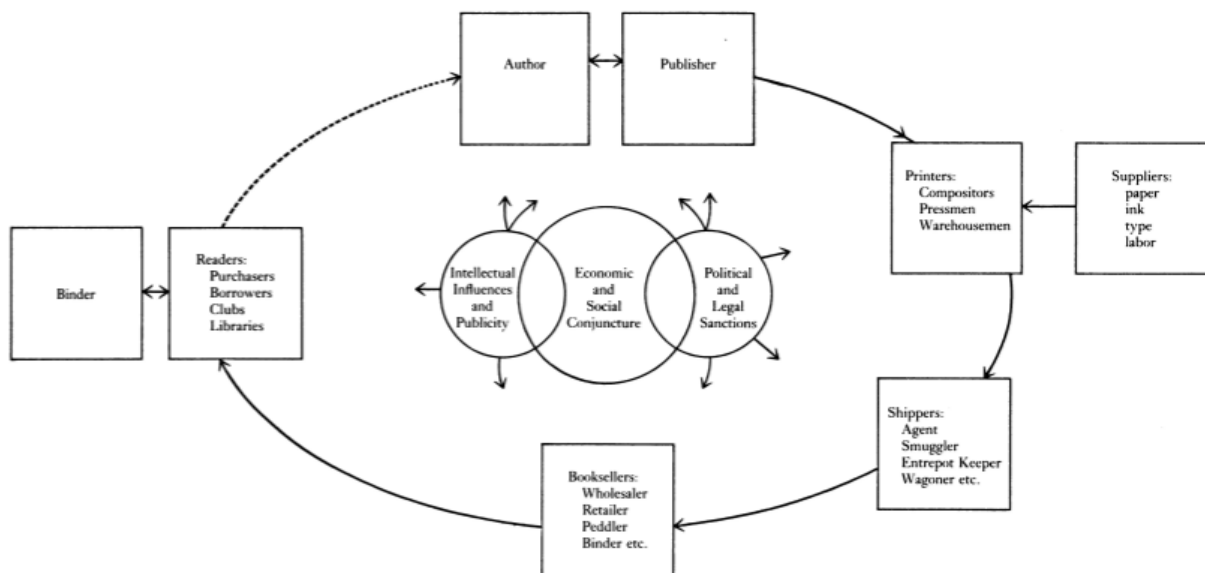


Figure 1. The Communications Circuit

Image: 'The communications circuit' from Robert Darnton, 'What Is the History of Books?' *Daedalus* Vol.111, No. 3 (1982), pp.65-83, p.68.

# Approaches to Artists' Publishing, Periodical Studies and Self-Publishing

Two rapidly developing fields of research appear, initially, to provide useful tools for analysing *Inventory*, these are the fields designated as the book work and the artist's magazine. Where the artist's book or book work is an established specialised field *which* has received several major studies<sup>57</sup> the emergence of studies of artist's magazines has developed slowly and in relation to a much broader field of periodical studies which has depended on the generalisation of large-scale digitisation projects by libraries internationally.<sup>58</sup> Whilst I will later return to the artist book as a model which informs *Inventory* conceptually and in terms of its field of distribution and appreciation, *Inventory* distinguished itself from this field primarily as a *journal*. It is not a one-off publication, nor is it the product of a single author.<sup>59</sup> It might be mistaken for, but is not, a craftily-produced singular edition by a single artist-author or a collaboration between several, but a periodical, a serially and mass-produced commodity. Opposing this monolithic view of books, Johanna Drucker treats artist's books as a 'zone of activity', 'a zone made at the space at the intersection of a number of different disciplines, fields, and ideas – rather than at their limits', refusing a canonical account based upon 'a rigid or definitive characterization of artists' books'.<sup>60</sup> One key aspect of the study of periodicals is that they lend themselves, in distinction to single-authored books or single artists' works, to the self-conscious participation in and contribution towards a larger enterprise. As Latham & Scholes explain, sketching out the nascent field of periodical studies,

we have often been too quick to see magazines merely as containers of discrete bits of information rather than autonomous objects of study. [...] Th[e] immediacy [of new media], in turn, reveals these objects to us anew, so that we have begun to see them not

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57 Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, New York City: Granary Books, 1995; Clive Phillpot, *Booktrek: Selected Essays on Artists' Books (1972-2010)*, Lionel Bovier (Ed.), Zurich; Dijon: JRP/Ringier; Les presses du réel, 2013; Stephen Bury, *Artists' Books: The Book as a Work of Art, 1963-2000*, London: Bernard Quaritch Ltd, 2015. Drucker, 2014.

58 Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, 'The Rise of Periodical Studies', *PMLA* 121, No. 2 (2006), pp.517–531.

59 Whilst *Inventory* may be considered a group name, in some ways a collective author, the contributions comprising the journal were individual and changed issue by issue.

60 *The Century of Artists' Books*, op. cit., p.1.

as resources to be disaggregated into their individual components but as texts requiring new methodologies and new types of collaborative investigation.<sup>61</sup>

I follow this view by ‘uncovering the connections’ between individual authors, between individual and group, and between *Inventory* and other journals in its field.<sup>62</sup> Here, Robert Darnton’s concept of a ‘communications circuit’ also seems eminently applicable, according to Annette Gilbert, this circuit ‘runs from the author to the publisher [...], the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader’ and attempts to capture ‘each phase of this process and the process as a whole, in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural, in the surrounding environment.’<sup>63</sup>

Darnton’s conceptualisation emerged out of the study of Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopedie*, and this framework and the questions it poses remain foundational for my study, because the integrality of print to the emergence of enlightenment thought and the matrices of form, authority, clandestinity and communication it describes were also very much at stake in the systematic modes of publishing *Inventory* interested themselves in.<sup>64</sup> However, Annette Gilbert’s argument that the recognition of a text as a ‘work’ turn also on the ‘act[s] of becoming public’ and the ‘socialization’ of a text as part of a ‘practice’.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the group’s own self-presentations in terms of exhibitions, press releases, flyers, readings, performances and launches become crucial determining factors in the circulation of the work, and its self-distinction from other publications.<sup>66</sup>

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61 ‘The Rise of Periodical Studies’, op. cit., pp.517-518.

62 ‘Periodicals thus create and occupy typically complex and often unstable positions in sometimes collaborative and sometimes competitive cultural networks. Uncovering these sorts of connections – which are inevitably lost in the process of anthologization – adds new layers of density both to magazines themselves and to the work of individual contributors.’ Ibid., p.529.

63 Robert Darnton, ‘What is the history of books?’ *Daedalus*, Vol.111, No.3, 1982, pp.65-83, 67 quoted in Annette Gilbert (Ed.), *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Berlin & New York: Sternberg Press, 2016, pp. 9-10.

64 This thread will emerge more fully in the discussions of Bataille’s influence in Chapter 3 and in the consideration of the journal as form in Chapter 6. Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopedie, 1775-1800*, Cambridge: Mass, Harvard University Press, 1979.

65 *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, op. cit., p.10, (my emphasis).

66 Chapter 6 constitutes a particularly concentrated look at a presentation of *Inventory* at Info Centre, but this and other significant presentations, in exhibitions, reading rooms, bookshops, libraries, museums and the street, are discussed throughout this study.



**Fire, fire, fire,  
A FIERY FLYING ROLL  
Becoming a munition  
of flames!**

Find one bottle  
Fill with three parts  
kerosene and one part  
motor oil  
Cap and wrap with  
cotton soaked in  
gasoline



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Image: Inventory, 'A Flying Fiery Roll', artist's page in *Space Cooks*, c.2001



## Artists' Books, Bookworks and Publishing as a Practice

*Inventory* from its beginnings had an association with artists' books and book arts, in particular through several collaborations with arts commissioner Book Works and the journal's appearance in the anthology *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*.<sup>67</sup> This is the source of two important statements about publishing by *Inventory*'s editors and the book's wider significance indicates Book Works' willingness to widen its remit as a publisher, beyond just singular objects (artists' books or multiples) of interest, to survey a complex and entangled processual field of 'artists' publishing'. As well as *Inventory*'s hybrid publishing and performance project *Smash This Puny Existence*, Book Works published several individual titles by *Inventory* contributors – Neil Chapman, Steve Beard and Victoria Halford, and Nick Norton. Mid-way through beginning this study Book Works commissioned a new title by *Inventory*, *The Counsel of Spent*, to be authored by the remaining members of the first editorial group (Adam Scrivener and Paul Claydon), finally released in 2018.<sup>68</sup> Book Works, a long standing publisher of writing and book projects by artists, has played a substantial role in championing and promoting artist's writing which deserves to be distinguished somewhat from the relatively recently coined term 'art writing' – a term which is synonymous with both the professionalisation of writing as a necessary tool of trade of artists, an integral aspect of their education and as a 'medium' or specialism of certain artists, who use text or language in their work, as opposed to others, who just write occasionally.<sup>69</sup> Annette Gilbert argues that publishing itself could be considered an artistic practice in itself, but this rings somewhat tautologically.<sup>70</sup> Instead, I will argue for specific latitudes granted to *Inventory* through its

67 Maria Fusco & Ian Hunt (Eds.), *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*. London: Bookworks, 2004.

68 <https://www.bookworks.org.uk/node/1941> [Accessed 19 September, 2018]

69 Indeed, as John Douglas Miller argues, 'it is hard to see why some of this splurge of words has to have the word "art" tagged onto it at all. Why is it "art" writing and not just writing?', John Douglas Miller, 'Art/Writing', *Art Monthly*, No.349, September 2011, available <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/art-writing-by-john-douglas-millar-september-2011> [Accessed 19 September, 2018]; for some of the educational courses mushrooming at UK Art Schools see <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/study/graduate-degrees/master-of-letters-art-writing/>; <https://www.rca.ac.uk/schools/school-of-arts-humanities/writing/> [Both accessed 19 September, 2018] Despite the professional link between the establishment of 'art writing' in the UK via the figure of Maria Fusco, a former Editor at Book Works, it is notable that since the establishment of art writing as a buzzword more or less synonymous with pretentious art-referential prose, Book Works has turned its interests primarily towards politically engaged and less easily categorisable work. Most recently I would draw attention to two series edited by Stewart Home (whose contribution to self-published zines, communist theory, satirical fiction and art criticism is substantial and is partially discussed in Chapter 4) and a subsequent series edited by feminist political philosopher Nina Power, in which *Inventory*'s *The Counsel of Spent* was commissioned.

70 'publishing and making books has become an essential part of a comprehensive artistic practice, suggests that it incorporates a striking critical diagnosis of the contemporary moment. In fact, it has become increasingly more frequent for the practice of authors, artists, and designers to overlap with the practice of publishers, and vice versa. It is by no means uncommon for publishing to be conceptually integrated into a work and even for publishing to be understood as an artistic project or declared as a work itself. If this were the case, then publishing would have to be

presentation as art and others granted by its self-presentation as extra-artistic, these will be held in tension rather than resolved onto one or other side.<sup>71</sup>

## Medium-Specific Publishing

Three further conditions demand additional attention both to the overall form of *Inventory* journal as ‘an autonomous object of study’ and in terms of the impact of new media on its study. Firstly, as touched upon earlier, the study of an object made by artists requires aesthetic research, this means that careful attention must be paid both to artistic elements and extra-artistic elements, maintaining the view that the specific object of *Inventory* journal is an ensemble of these elements. Secondly, following the argument made by Dušan Barok, maintainer and editor of the notable aggregator of digitised avant-garde publications Monoskop, avant-garde magazines can be considered forms of ‘medium-specific publishing’ requiring particular attention to their treatment of publishing conventions, formats and interaction of visual and textual content.<sup>72</sup> This is a perspective which has been recently developed by Gwen Allen with regards to conceptual art’s engagement with the magazine form in one of the first studies to treat artists’ magazines as a specific area of practice.<sup>73</sup> Few conceptual artists engaged with the magazine or printed journal as the primary vehicle of their practice, yet for *Inventory* the journal was the group’s primary form, out of which other presentations of their work developed.<sup>74</sup> *Inventory*’s efforts cannot be conscripted by the understanding of the magazine solely as an ‘ideal expressive vehicle for art’.<sup>75</sup> Rather, I argue *Inventory* took on aspects of the journal as form which were neither only ‘expressive’ nor only ‘for art’, but encompassed aspects of the journal’s very claim to facticity, ability to produce knowledge

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understood as an artistic form of expression itself.’ *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, op. cit., p.7.

71 Another mode of self-presentation *Inventory* engaged with was representing the journal at book fairs. These are both social occasions and cultural events in themselves. An *Inventory* stall appeared annually at the regular art bookfair Publish and Be Damned (2004–2013) and the Anarchist Bookfair (1985–2017), in recent years an *Inventory* stall was present, selling both back issues of the journal and assorted poster projects, at the Artists’ Self-Publishing (ASP) fair held at the ICA (2015–2018). Each of these bookfairs ran programmes of talks, presentations or performances, as public events they are each viewed as integral to the respective and sometimes overlapping artistic and political publics they cohere.

72 ‘in their day avant-garde magazines had been the closest to medium-specific publishing. Challenging the standardized procedures of the industry they tended to equalize the importance of writing, editing, illustrations, layout, typography, printing and distribution as mutually constitutive practices.’ Dušan Barok, ‘Avant-Garde and Modernist Magazines’, [https://monoskop.org/Avant-garde\\_and\\_modernist\\_magazines](https://monoskop.org/Avant-garde_and_modernist_magazines) [Accessed 10 December, 2017]

73 ‘While artists used the magazine to document their work, they also began to explore it as a medium in its own right, creating works expressly for the mass-produced page. These original artists’ contributions (sometimes called artists’ projects, artists’ pages, or magazine art) investigated the distinct materiality of the magazine as well as its unique properties as a form of communication.’ *Artists’ Magazines*, op. cit., p.1.

74 *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

75 *Artists’ Magazines*, op. cit., p.1.

and perform scientific authority. Following a mode of enquiry, engaged with only with by outliers in the general current of conceptual art, of intervention ‘into the communicative conditions of the magazine itself’, *Inventory* sought to galvanise activities and experiments in print which were self-consciously excessive of this phase of artists’ engagement with the magazine form primarily because it extended a commitment to ‘extra-artistic interests’, which had been characteristic of the inter-war avant-garde and in their own period sat awkwardly, and in excess of, the limited artistic claims being made for other initiatives involved in artists’ publishing.<sup>76</sup> In this sense, they participate a critical mastery of emergent general social technique, which Johanna Drucker names ‘diagrammatic writing’. This is writing ‘that integrates human and machine protocols of composition’, spurred by ‘computational capacities for synthesis and display’, which ‘is emerging, and with it, the need to specify its critical properties.’<sup>77</sup> As I have sketched here and will continue to develop below, these emergent discussions of ‘artists’ publishing’ (Gilbert); ‘medium-specific publishing’ (Barok); ‘diagrammatic writing’ (Drucker) and ‘diagrammatic publishing’ (Thoburn) and the ‘communism of printed matter’ (Thoburn) are conceptualisations formulated shortly after *Inventory*’s life-span but help interpret both its specificity and plenitude as it presents itself to us now.<sup>78</sup>

## A Communism of Printed Matter

In his preface to the *Anti-Book*, Nicholas Thoburn outlines the project’s ‘communist intent’ to sketch an outline of a field of self-critical publishing. That is publishing which takes issue with the standardising form of publishing conventions and produces instead what he calls, after Jacques Rancière, ‘hieroglyphs of the anti-commodity’.<sup>79</sup> This may raise the fear then that these printed objects, books, pamphlets and magazines will be framed within a logic of a bourgeois anti-capitalism, one which seeks to champion and amplify the exceptions to capitalism in order to undermine it and prefigure other social relations. However, Thoburn instead argues that if his theoretical objects put communism at stake, ‘it is a communism that would draw attention to [...]

76 Quoting Allen, describing the magazine work of Dan Graham, *Ibid.*, p.34. On ‘extra-artistic interests’ cf. John Roberts, ‘the avant-garde requires the artist to re-position himself within the intellectual division of labour as someone who makes no distinction between the so-called artistic interests and artistic technique and extra-artistic interests.’ Roberts, John. ‘Writerly Artists: Conceptual Art, Bildung, and the Intellectual Division of Labour’, *Rab-Rab: Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries into Art*, no. 01 (2014): 9–20, p.12.

77 Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2014, p.181.

78 ‘Avant-Garde and Modernist Magazines’, *op. cit.*; *Artists’ Magazines*, *op. cit.*; Johanna Drucker, ‘Diagrammatic Writing’. *New Formations*, No.78, 2013, pp.83–101; *Anti-Book*, *op. cit.*

79 Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, p.62.

contradictions and not make as though its intent can lift it from the world of capital'.<sup>80</sup> Communism here is synonymous not with smoothness or equality, but in fact with difficulty and specification. The projects Thoburn surveys tend to render from the determinations of print form barbed and spiky negations of readers' expectations, popularity, even readability, print conventions, and the 'transposable' feigned universality of the book as a commodity.<sup>81</sup> These attacks offer up the conventions they negate to critical examination, indicating not only the gaps between socially necessary labour and its potentially non-alienated counterpart but also non-alienated labour's impossibility under capitalism and how a published product directed towards purportedly universal utility and accessibility must participate in a chain of deformations in order to become a bearer of exchange value. Thoburn argues that many small press projects, indeed many pamphlets, have a price but no exchange value, this does not necessarily make them exemplary of non-alienated labour. Rather, through a sequence of specific moves which denature wage labour and engender critical thought about their own manufacture, they unsettle 'work and its identities'.<sup>82</sup> The flight from labour is not a model, but an antagonistic standpoint from which issues the production of singular allegorical objects through which to think communism as a movement of negation and non-identity. This is, in Thoburn's words, 'a communism immanent to the social relations of capital' and through it we travel through the concepts of 'literary communism',<sup>83</sup> 'communist writing' to an 'expanded communism of printed matter'.<sup>84</sup>

Thoburn's formulation is immensely useful to an analysis of *Inventory*, because, if the journal and its contributors did mobilise a critical attention to the material matter of medium-specificity in terms of the journal as a format, this was far from isolated from the attention to media forms encountered outside of the journal and elsewhere in the commodified world. *Inventory's* attention, through publishing, to the constitution of the object world not only de-natured itself as activity, *as work*, but also reflected upon evidence of the transformation of concrete into abstract labour in their immediate experience. Their contradictory status as subjects therefore remains constantly in view, from the boredom of work to the heady freedoms of independent expression, yet it is the very

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80 Ibid., p.ix.

81 Ibid., pp.98–108.

82 Ibid., p.107.

83 This phrase is most commonly associated with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, based on his engagement with the work of Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille. *Anti-Book* however, diverts from Nancy's formulation presumably because of its emphasis on the self-sufficiency of text and, directs us instead to the phrase's origin in Gil Wolman & Guy Debord, 'A User's Guide to Détournement', in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. 'Mode d'emploi du détournement' originally appeared in the Belgian surrealist journal *Les Lèvres Nues* #8, May 1956. Available, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm> [Accessed 10 December, 2017]

84 *Anti-Book*, op. cit., pp.278-279.

aggregation of these contradictions, not their overcoming, which the presentation of *Inventory* as an ensemble permits.

## Historicising Artist's Writing, Artistic and Extra-Artistic Interests

Though a commitment to both writing and pursuing extra-artistic interests through publishing practices can be understood to have generalised in the post-war period, I seek to show that *Inventory*'s specific commitment to the journal form as bearer of extra-artistic knowledge is self-consciously oriented by deep engagement and contrarian revival of inter-war avant-garde practices, surrealist and para-ethnographic research. One particularly slippery aspect under attention in this study, which has both artistic and extra-artistic qualities, depending on the nature of the contribution and the perspective from which it is approached, is writing itself. It is of course true that writing by artists was something which was prefigured in the interwar period and became generalised in the 1960s and experienced another surge in the 1990s and 2000s, but contributions to *Inventory* can by no means be contained by the description: writing by artists. Instead, then, I shall explore the significance of writing by artists through John Robert's notion of 'writerly artists', taking seriously *Inventory*'s eclectic contributor base and the premise that the journal was to feature not only art, not essays about art, but essays on a broad range of phenomena. Against Stephen Bury's attempt to demarcate a historical ditch into which artist's magazines disappeared around 1937, *Inventory*, alongside several contemporaries, self-consciously revived the practice of self-publishing a printed journal at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and with a keen awareness of both their inter-war avant-garde and post-war neo-avant-garde precursors and the technological conjuncture developed by growing use of the internet, digital communication infrastructure and digital publishing tools.<sup>85</sup>

As a publication made by artists *Inventory* marks itself out from what became from the 1960s to the 2000s an increasingly densely populated field (the artist's book) in three significant ways. Firstly, by publishing in serial form. Secondly, by sustaining that form more or less intact over a decade.

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85 'This period [1900-1937] was the last one in which the printed format was the primary mode for communicating information; film and broadcasting were ready to take over. An avant-garde today would not use printed media in a significant way today.' Stephen Bury, *Breaking the Rules: The Printed Face of the European Avant Garde 1900-1937*, London: British Library, 2007, p.8. I have not yet managed to date *Inventory*'s first website, but since the organisation who hosted it closed in 1999 we can place it sometime after the inception of the journal in 1994 and before 1999: <http://bak.spc.org/inventory/1.1.html> [Accessed 20 November, 2016]

Thirdly by publishing not only the writing or artistic work of the core contributors but also the work of many others. Fourthly the long-term and serial nature of the journal puts it largely at odds with the kinds of analyses which typically treat one-off artist publications as discrete art works, and this is where there is room for some agreement and crucial differences.<sup>86</sup> The shift in artists' work with magazines during the period 1960-2000 can be described through a formulation Stephen Perkins develops from Clive Phillpot's observations, he identifies a 'new attitude by artists concerning the magazine page, and indeed their approach to the totality of the magazine itself.'<sup>87</sup> Perkins pushes beyond Phillpot's framework of 'magazine art' – art completed by its printing in a magazine – towards the magazine as medium, the 'conception of the magazine itself moved beyond being simply a site of *reproduction*, and now began to be explored by artists as a site of *production*, and as a consequence this activity established the artists' magazine as an artistic medium in itself.'<sup>88</sup>

In light of understanding *Inventory* as a journal or magazine, Virginia Nimarkoh's project and publication, *Indent*, is significant because it framed their work, through a series of interviews with *Inventory* and its peers, as 'hybrid' 'self-publishing' projects.<sup>89</sup> Of the five groups interviewed four were, like *Inventory*, serial publications. Nimarkoh's introductory essay discusses the legacy of conceptual art and the artist's book, but crucially emphasises the difference of these late-1990s projects in their incorporation of other, arguably more ephemeral, media (such as the internet, CD-Roms, flyers, posters and magazines), an engagement with mass media, and the necessity in a late-20<sup>th</sup> century climate to engage with 'market forces'.<sup>90</sup> In light of the specific plurality of *Inventory*'s praxis, I will treat the artist's journal not only as an artwork, but as a hybrid object, a commodity, which may contain visual artworks, written works, political debate, criticism, fiction and theory, an ensemble which is itself supported and extended by publicity and other publications (flyers, posters, video, radio) distributed beyond the journal's pages.<sup>91</sup> This evident plurality shall be retained in

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86 *Artists' Magazines*, op. cit.

87 Stephen Perkins, 'An Assembly of Conspirators: Omnibus News and Smile', 2016. <http://artistsperiodicals.blogspot.com/> [Accessed 10 November, 2017]

88 'An Assembly of Conspirators', op. cit.

89 Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999.

90 The other practices and publications surveyed by this publication are *Bank*, *Mute*, Grennan & Sperandio, Emma Rushton & Derek Tyman (*The Mule*). Ibid., pp.5-9. Interestingly each of these incorporate an aspect of dissemblance to them: *Inventory*'s adoption of the journal format is covered in this and the previous chapters; *Bank* tabloid was an irregular newsprint satire of artworld news mimicking a tabloid newspaper format; *The Mule* 'mimic[ked]' a broadsheet newspaper, publishing a single edition in a run of 15000 distributed in one day featuring 26 artists and accompanied by an internet site; *Mute* began as a free newspaper covering the development of culture on the internet printed on pink paper similar to the *Financial Times*, in an effort to force a conversation between old media and new.

91 Here, Lisa Gitelman's insight that printing has been traditionally thought of as 'the art preservative' of other arts rings true, and I shall supplement Gitelman's framing with the extension towards 'other arts' and *practices*. *Paper Knowledge*, op. cit., p.22 and p.38.



view whilst maintaining a perspective of the larger enterprise as a *work* comparable but not reducible to a multi-volume *book*.

## Artists' Writing and Writerly Artists

A distinguishing characteristic of *Inventory*'s exploration of the journal format is not just the interest of artists in text, but a specific interest in writing. John Roberts locates a development of 'writerlyness', recovered by practices associated with conceptual art from the interwar modernist avant-garde, as a key competence supporting artists' intervention in the intellectual division of labour in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>92</sup> Consequential for 'writerly' art practices was the expansion of both higher education and print technologies and the accessibility of these resources to lower middle and working class artists.<sup>93</sup> Though these conditions were made available through art school, they weren't necessarily restricted to the traditional settings for presentation that the art school and studio produced for. In fact, one of the main contradictions Roberts identifies is that the liberal defence of art as 'self-expression', championed by the protests at Hornsey College of Art in 1968, 'allowed the space for a small number of lecturers and visiting artists armed with the new post-artisanal agenda, to establish new theoretical frameworks and new spaces of contestation'.<sup>94</sup> This openness to theory and 'writerly ethos' was, for Roberts, a consequence of conceptual art and the independent status of British art schools.

Despite the anti-intellectual torpor of many fine art departments in the late 1960s and 1970s, non-academic working class and lower middle class students, were able to receive a theoretical, cultural and political training [...] they were in a position to open themselves up to this outcome through their own autodidactic efforts. One of the consequences of this is that the 'post-conceptual' art school in the 1980s in the UK becomes an intellectual training ground and space for theoretical speculation (and the building of creative and theoretical cadres) completely unavailable to other working-class students and lower-middle class students within the education system. [...] the opening up of new autodidactic conditions and spaces for intellectual work 'from

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92 'Writerly Artists', op. cit.

93 Ibid., p.11, pp.16-17.

94

Ibid., p.16.

below', begin to dissolve the fixed boundaries between, artist, art historian and critic. As such, this writerly shift is part of a deeper dynamic as the post-artisanal conditions of art become the determining framework of 'value' and 'research' in art [...].<sup>95</sup>

For Roberts the 'writerly ethos' for artists is initially defined through the transformations of the conditions of art-making by the avant-garde from 1910-1930 (Duchamp, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy), but this 'writerly model' is in turn borrowed and developed by conceptual art in the 1960s.

[W]riting defines and shapes the art inside and outside the studio', but perhaps more importantly, by committing to 'transforming the conditions of production under which the artist works, the artist is also committed to the work of rehistoricization in theorizing and defending the conditions of this transformation.'<sup>96</sup>

Whilst I shall argue that *Inventory* fall into Roberts' characterisation, it is necessary to address the significance of the omission of surrealism from his canon of writerly artists. For Roberts, and arguably Art & Language, surrealism is tainted by association with subjectivism, expressivism and psychoanalysis. This is not the case for *Inventory*, whose own interpretation of surrealism, as I shall explore, foregrounded the movement as one of intellectual pursuit of knowledge and revolutionary politics, and emphasised its relation not to psychoanalysis but to modernist sociology and ethnography. Rather than the 'writerly artists' new found intellectuality being purposed to further specify the concept of art, as in Art & Language's practice, in *Inventory*'s it is the tool of an expansive search for knowledge and action in society at large. Furthermore, understood as an aporia in conceptual art, it is possible to argue for the self-conscious exploration of experience and expression as an area of conceptual or philosophical praxis in *Inventory*, and this finds support from Keston Sutherland's recent work which polemicises upon the errors of both 'formalist' and 'Marxist' antsubjectivism.<sup>97</sup>

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95 Ibid., pp.16-17.

96 Ibid., p.13.

97 Keston Sutherland, 'Theses on Antisubjectivist Dogma', 1 May 2013, <http://afieryflyingroule.tumblr.com/post/49378474736/keston-sutherland-theses-on-antisubjectivist> [accessed 25 September, 2018] See also, *Inventory*'s numerous statements on the centrality of experience and subjectivisation to the journal: 'the journal confronts the idea of the self and how it is shaped. How it is shaped through its own internal processes, but especially how it is shaped by the social forces that surround it, outside of its control.' 'Press Release for Inventory, Vol.3 No.2' undated, c.1999. Chelsea College of Art Archives.

## Surrealist Research and Surrealist Models of Publication

In his appraisal of 'Nineties' art and culture, critic Michael Bracewell situates *Inventory* as one of the practices pushing against the 'zeitgeist' in the visual arts of the period.<sup>98</sup> He highlights *Inventory* as one of a number of practices involved in publishing characterised by a 'foregrounding of documentation over aesthetics [...] and of politics over individualism'.<sup>99</sup> Interviewed in this study, *Inventory* make statements which position them in opposition to the currents of their time (yBa) and orientates them towards collective practice, research and recovery of surrealism's legacy.

'We all abandoned individual practice at the start of the 1990s [...] primarily because we found the whole new British art scene, which had originated around Hirst's "Freeze" exhibition, to be utterly alienating. We saw ourselves as more connected to surrealism, Dada, Walter Benjamin or Bataille, and we wanted to talk about ideas through a journal which could be slightly academic, mad, and shocking.

But that wasn't enough; we wanted to explore the various economies of social life through social situations, and so our work is political inasmuch as it's occurring at a time when even the word "socialism" appears to be taboo. We regard nihilism in a pro-active, Nietzschean sense, as something to be worked through, and empowered by. By investigating the nature of field work, we turn the anthropological gaze back on ourselves. This could be translated into politics – through the surrealist notion of a permanent state of revolution.'<sup>100</sup>

yBa's anti-intellectualism is discussed in existing criticism.<sup>101</sup> *Inventory* distinguished their activity not only in terms which sublated individual to collective practice but also by situating their organ of collective research, the journal, as 'slightly academic', but also 'mad' and 'political'. *Inventory*'s rich readings of Benjamin and Bataille license a decision to equivocate over field work and to engage in politics and society. This view militates against the eclectic pop art approaches of *Inventory*'s contemporaries, but *Inventory* would retain an interest in mass cultural commodity

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98 Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, London: Flamingo, 2000, pp.29-32.

99 Ibid., p.29.

100 Ibid., p.31.

101 Naomi Siderfin, Julian Stallabrass & Duncan Mccorquodale (Eds.) *Occupational Hazard: Critical Writing On Recent British Art*, Black Dog Publishing, 1998.

detritus but from a different perspective.<sup>102</sup> *Inventory*'s clearest statement on how surrealism guided their project distinguished themselves clearly from mainstream consensus.

Today, if one asked someone on the street what Surrealism means, then most would have an idea. For many, it would refer to the strange and otherworldly landscapes of Dali. [...] Unwittingly, the Visual language of Surrealism juxtaposition, montage, etc. has through its employment in advertising, television, film and its concomitant impact upon the urban environment (billboards, video screens, dot-matrix and neon signs and so on) became part of the everyday life of capitalism. [...] However, this appropriation was merely the adoption of surface techniques while jettisoning the political and sociological aims of Surrealism.

Thus, it is a mistake to assume that, in its early days at least, that this was a visual art movement at all this altered guise came later and was mostly the work of one individual, Andre Breton. Instead, if one looks at early issues of *La Revolution Surrealiste* or the early writings of, say, Louis Aragon, Roger Caillois or 'dissident' Georges Bataille, one finds an attitude that is concerned with the critical examination and, therefore transformation, of material phenomena, images and ideas a form of ethnographic surrealism, a diagonal Science.<sup>103</sup>

In *Inventory*'s reading of surrealist investigation: 'critical examination and, therefore transformation, of material phenomena', takes primacy over interest in the visual arts. This interpretation is supported by the deliberately 'scientific' appearance of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, and other journals.<sup>104</sup> However, *Inventory*'s originality derives from a substantial deepening of the notion that the 'avant-garde embrace[d] science' by pursuing and reconstructing the obscure outlines of a project of surrealist sociology.<sup>105</sup>

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102 Approaches to popular or mass culture are provided for by the work of both Benjamin and Bataille as shall be explored in the next chapter.

103 *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: a Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-161, p.151.

104 Cf. Pierre Naville, *La Espérance mathématique: Vol I: Le temps du surréal*, Paris: Galilée, 1977 and Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p.68.

105 In early drafts for the journal's cover and first press release their method 'fierce sociology' was drafted as 'surrealist sociology'. This formulation of the surrealism's orientation towards science is supported by Allan Stoekl, 'The Avant-Garde Embraces Science', in *A New History of French Literature*, Denis Hollier (Ed.), Harvard University Press, 1989, pp.929-935.

This reading of surrealism, licensed by the view ‘[t]hat the history of the dada and surrealist movements is embodied in the history of their reviews’, was presented in the exhibition *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* at the Hayward Gallery in 1977.<sup>106</sup>

Dada and Surrealism are not art movements; they are not even literary movements with attendant artists. They are religions, With a view of the world, a code of behaviour, a hatred of materialism, an ideal of man’s future state, a proselytizing spirit, a joy in membership of a community of the like-minded, a demand that the faithful must sacrifice other attachments, a hostility to art for art’s sake, a hope of transforming existence. [...]

Those preoccupations manifested themselves in the heyday of the movements in a variety of forms books, tracts, lectures, performances, meetings, demonstrations. But the dominant vehicle – dominant perhaps through being of its essence a vehicle simultaneously of individual and of collective utterance was the magazine.<sup>107</sup>

*Inventory*’s editors acknowledged this catalogue as a key source.<sup>108</sup> Its approach to the surrealist movement placed the journal at the centre of a series of dynamic assemblages of media forms celebrating print as ‘the art preservative’ of other arts but also providing for expansive new possible articulations of its relation to diverse objects and representations.<sup>109</sup> Sylvester’s emphasis on publications as ‘a vehicle simultaneously of individual and of collective utterance’ laid out a territory by which *Inventory* could interrelate not only ‘individual and collective utterances’ inside the journal, but also without, by establishing dialogues, or even silent *correspondences* with other collective or individual initiatives, publications or groups.

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106 David Sylvester, ‘Introduction’ in Dawn Ades (Ed.), *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed: A Brief Guide to the Exhibition*. Edited by Dawn Ades. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978, p.2. The exhibition, conceived by David Sylvester and accompanied by an extensive catalogue by Dawn Ades, reconstructed Surrealism and Dada through seventeen sections each grouped around a specific journal or group of publications. Sylvester’s radical interpretation of surrealism insisted on the primacy of the journal or magazine form.

107 Ibid., p.1. This staging of surrealism and other movements as bound up with the material practices of publishing was organised around ‘wall montage[s] reproducing material from the review’, Ibid., p.2. By arranging ‘chosen objects in what might be called cabinets of curiosities’ amongst ‘books, pamphlets, leaflets, bulletins, catalogues, posters’ the display figured these materials in dynamic relationship to each other and brought the surrealist propensities for collecting into close correspondence with publishing and art making. The exhibition also emphasised the multi-media aspects of surrealism by providing a listening station for sound and spoken word recordings made by Dada and Surrealist artists and writers and an accompanying film programme.

108 Adam Scrivener singled out *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* as one of his key points of access into surrealism, in conversation with the author August, 2017.

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Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, op. cit., p.22 and p.38.

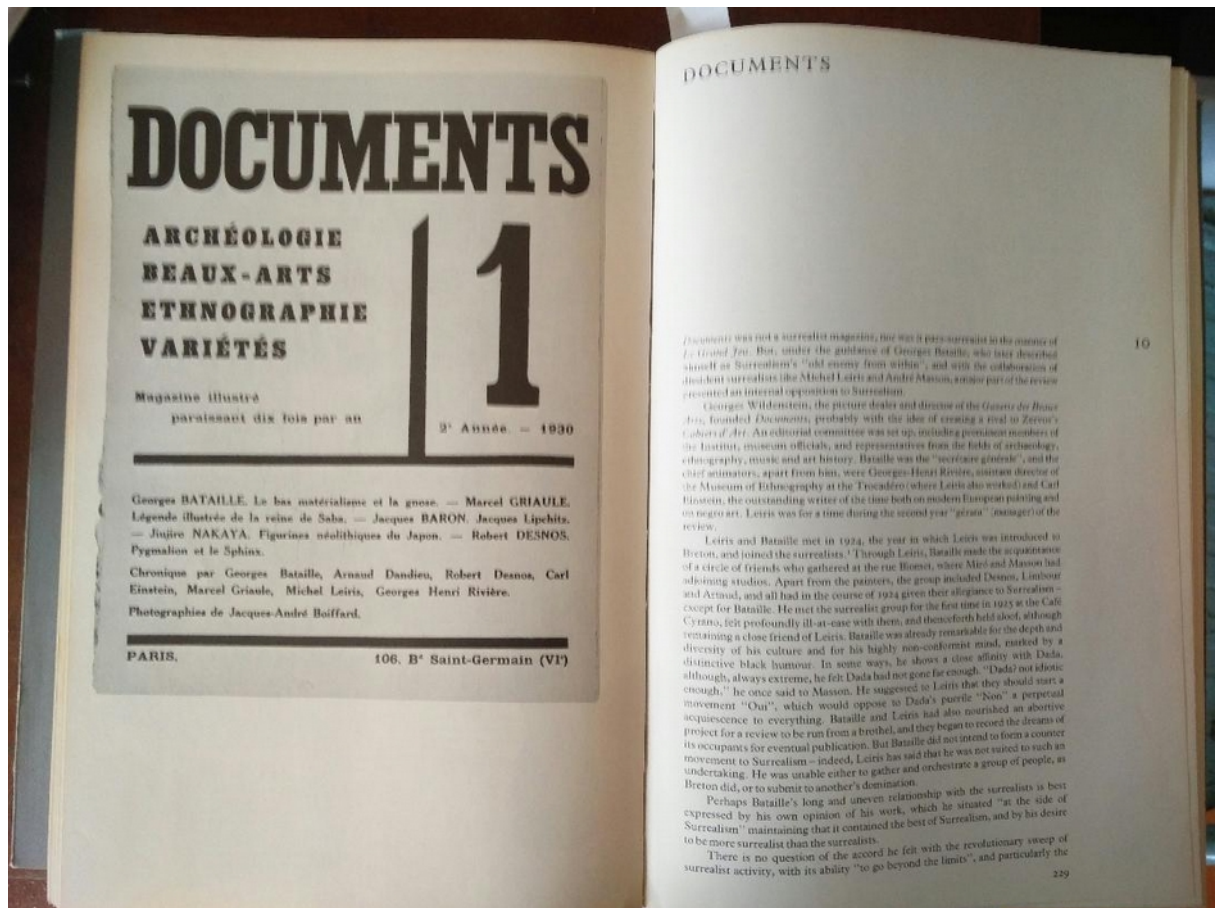


Image: Documents section in the exhibition catalogue *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, (1977)

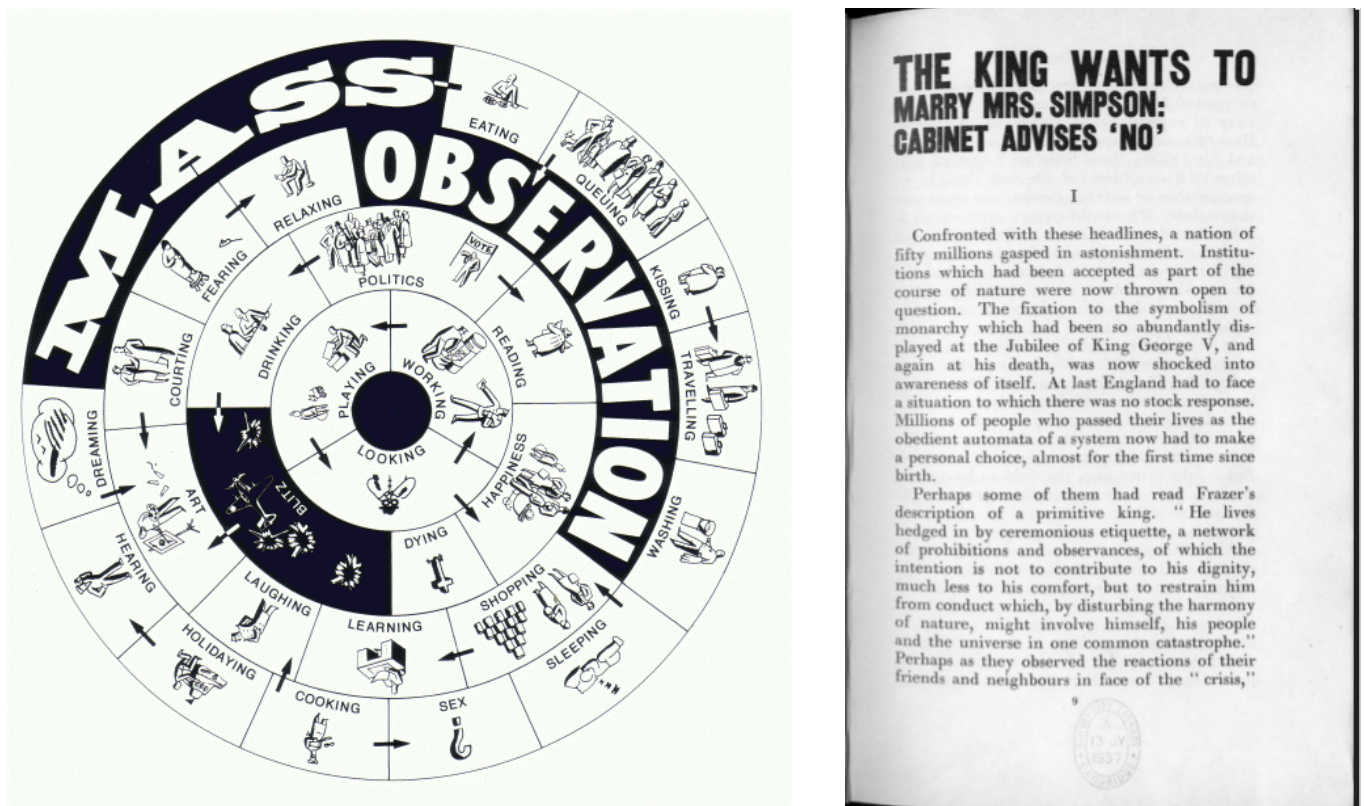


Image: (left) Mass Observation, (date unknown, source unknown) (right) Mass Observation, *Mass-Observation*, 1937, p.9



## Mass Observation: Correspondence and Correspondents

Mass Observation (MO) was a research group and publishing project rather than a journal.<sup>110</sup> Founded in 1937 by Charles Madge (a poet, Communist Party member and *Daily Mirror* journalist familiar with the English surrealists), Tom Harrisson (an anthropologist who had recently returned from ethnographic fieldwork in the South Pacific Islands) and Humphrey Jennings (a painter, designer and filmmaker also very much influenced by surrealism).<sup>111</sup> Despite choosing not to issue a journal, unlike most European surrealist groups, the MO used both the mass media (newspapers and radio) and traditional publishing (pamphlets and books) to both disseminate its research and solicit participant observers for its studies. In their first pamphlet they clearly saw the item's design, by Jennings, and printing as integral aspects of their work which aspired to distributed authorship.<sup>112</sup> Initiated through a letter sent by Charles Madge to the *New Statesman* newspaper on 2 January 1937 calling for an 'anthropology at home' and 'a science of ourselves' the group developed a novel hybrid of surrealism and ethnography, 'half-poetic, half-sociological'.<sup>113</sup> Indicating an attempt to read revelatory and sociological meaning into the coincidence of the burning down of Crystal Palace and the divorce and abdication of the King of England (an interregnum), the letter lead directly to a survey of the event of the Coronation of King George VI on 12 May 1937. This same text outlined the interests of the project in terms which demonstrate a passion for surrealism, poetry, everyday life and sociological interests:

Behaviour of people at war memorials.

Shouts and gestures of motorists.

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110 The first publication by the group somewhat muddies this view since it is a pamphlet subtitled *Mass-Observation Series 1*, obviously inferring it is a publication of a serial nature. Charles Madge & Charles Harrisson, *Mass-Observation*, Mass-Observation Series 1, London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1937. Later the group issued a *Mass-Observation Bulletin* (1947-1955),

[http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll/collection\\_descriptions/filereportlistings.php](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll/collection_descriptions/filereportlistings.php) [Accessed 25 May, 2018]

111 The group had many collaborators and among them were several artists and poets: Kathleen Raine (poet and Charles Madge's wife), David Gascoyne (artist), William Coldstream (artist). The first Mass Observation pamphlet invited potential contributors to write to the group's address and become 'a Mass-Observer', suggesting, at least at the beginning of its initiative, the group imagined its organisational principle as one of open collaboration with correspondents and collaborators. For example, 'Mass-Observation develops out of anthropology, psychology, and the sciences which study man,' the letter read, "but it plans to work with a mass of observers." Charles Madge, quoted in Caleb Crain, 'Surveillance Society: The Mass-Observation Movement and the Meaning of Everyday Life.', *The New Yorker*, 11 September 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/surveillance-society> [Accessed 19/09/2018]

112 'This pamphlet was produced with the help of many people besides the authors.' This note also goes on to acknowledge the 'criticism of technicians and workers, both men and women with whom the ideas were threshed out.' 'Note', *Mass-Observation*, op. cit., p.8.

113 Joe Moran, 'Science of Ourselves' in *New Statesman*, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2007/01/mass-observation-public> [Accessed 21/09/2017]

The aspidistra cult.

Anthropology of football pools.

Bathroom behaviour.

Beards, armpits, eyebrows.

Anti-semitism.

Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke.

Funerals and undertakers.

Female taboos about eating.

The private lives of midwives.<sup>114</sup>

Inventory produced a comparable list in a similarly significant programmatic statement, a call of sorts, the editorial, 'Do You Feel Crushed?':

So it is that Inventory is interested in all kinds of phenomena, all variations of being. Any subject/object that is expressive of differing, complex, relationships, which make up our cruel, effervescent, banal, laughable, existence.

All forms of communities, ensembles of data, clusters which encircle around a myriad of principles; of thoughts and feelings, which find themselves coagulating, forming knots and drifts, a sedimentary process from which one can take a cross section or a sample.

For example:

Anteaters, we must know more about the anteater. About ants also. Biology and the wildlife programme, both, need to be utterly routed, re-discovered and touched. We must write on the touch for the touched talk strangely.

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<sup>114</sup> Charles Madge, 'Letter to the *New Statesman and Nation*, January 30, 1937, quoted in 'Surveillance Society', op. cit.

The relationship between television and childrens' games needs to be explored. Also, what do computers mean to children?

What about .....

Pet-keeping in the East End of London.

The psychology of solitary long distance train journeys.

The changing forms of beard shapes and hair styles.

Amusement arcades.

The theatre and ritual of group conversation in pubs.

The classification and analysis of shaped food.

The history and motives for the placement of Egyptian relics in European city spaces.

Behaviour at cashpoints.

Plastic surgery and difference.

The significance and hierarchical distribution of gossip in the workplace.<sup>115</sup> Updating the subject matter, *Inventory* make direct allusion to the MO's propensity for collaged lists in several of their own methodological statements.<sup>116</sup> The list was a way to indicate broad interests, to level social phenomena in such a way that new connections might be made but also to render the familiar strange and unfamiliar.<sup>117</sup> Elsewhere, essays are sometimes styled as diaries, or log books, including dates and (on occasion) locations suggesting a technical and factographic quality to the texts.<sup>118</sup>

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115 *Inventory*, 'Do You Feel Crushed?' *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.4-8, p.7.

116 The primary source for *Inventory*'s methodology is a series of editorials: *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5; *Inventory*, 'Fierce Sociology' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8; *Inventory*, 'Do You Feel Crushed?' *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.4-8; *Inventory*, 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology', *Inventory* Vol.5 No.1 2003; *Inventory*, 'Without Intent', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.4-9; *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-159. Of these, 'Do You Feel Crushed?', 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology' and 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket' each contain substantial lists.

117 'New constellations, subjects, themes at once contradictory and apposite, coming into direct collision with one another, flattering themselves, entering into secret discourses [sic], leaving residues and traces never before detected – NEVER BEFORE SOUGHT. *Inventory* is a means of writing, recording, reclassifying and cataloguing the social material life that exists around us.' *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology...', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5, p.4.

*Inventory* encountered the Mass Observation group at art school under the tutelage of Patrick Keiller<sup>119</sup>, they drew substantially from the MO in developing their own method of *fierce sociology* and in this they appear to have also drawn directly on James Clifford's acknowledgement of Mass Observation as an example of 'surrealist ethnography'.<sup>120</sup> Since this will be addressed in full in the following Chapters, here I briefly indicate the overlaps between MO and *Inventory* as publishing practices before investigating the method and its significance in more detail later.

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118 Three notable examples are Richard Bradbury, 'Granted Ground', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.43-73, which is styled as a diary entries over successive (but undated) days; Steve Beard, 'Dead London', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.15-30, which contains email and document headings e.g. 'from:', 'time:', 'date:' and 'site:', 'date' or 'data:', and Nick Norton, 'Haptic Radio', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.9-14, which uses 'frequency listings from an article of [sic] scanning by Tim Baker. Published in issue 2 of *Noisegate*' as headings

119 Nick Norton claims that it was their tutor at Middlesex University, Patrick Keiller, who introduced the work of Mass-Observation to himself and Scrivener. 'Patrick was the person who put me onto the Humphrey Jennings book *Pandemonium* - which I loved (love - still have the copy I read 88/89) - thinking of Mass Observation [...]. Although Patrick was personal tutor in the 3rd year he also had regular tutorials with me throughout the 3 years. [...] Patrick Keiller should be noted as a great tutor (as well as filmmaker/writer) for all the reasons which also make his film-work enduring: silence - long scrutiny - pointed observation - subversive humour - concern.' Nick Norton email correspondence with the author 10 October and 11 October 2018.

120 In his famous essay James Clifford singles out Mass Observation as a fertile example of 'Surrealist Ethnography' in the second version of his essay: James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Surrealism' in *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1988, pp.117-150, FN14 p.143.

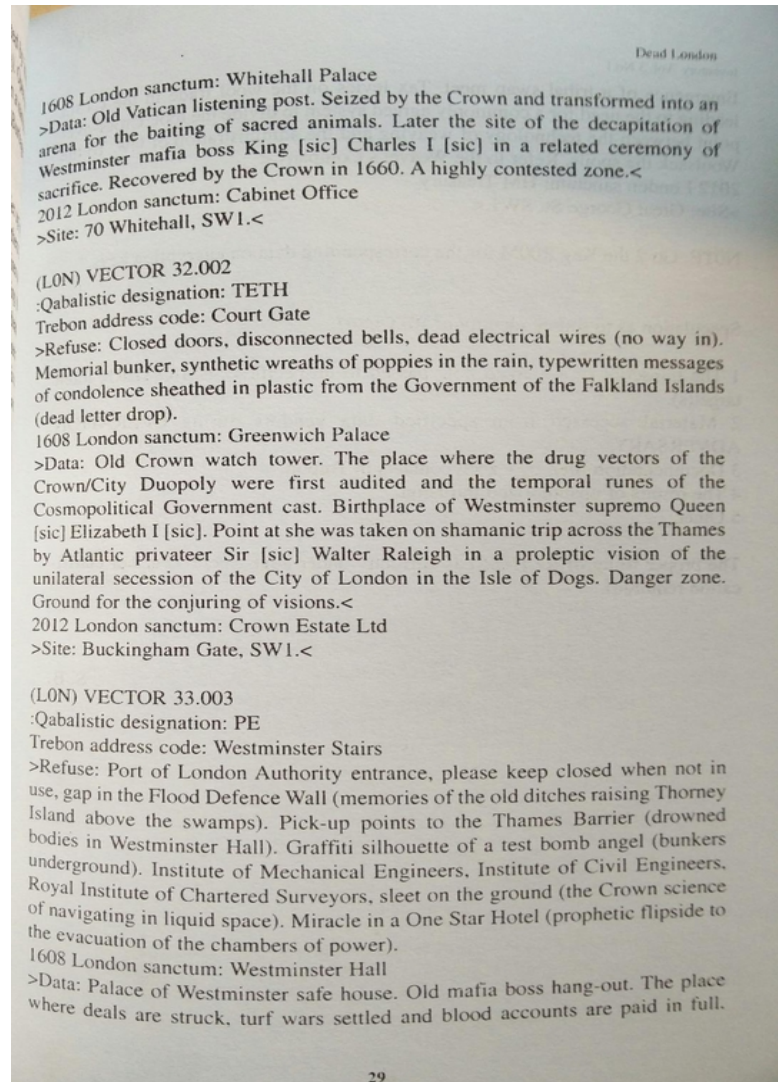
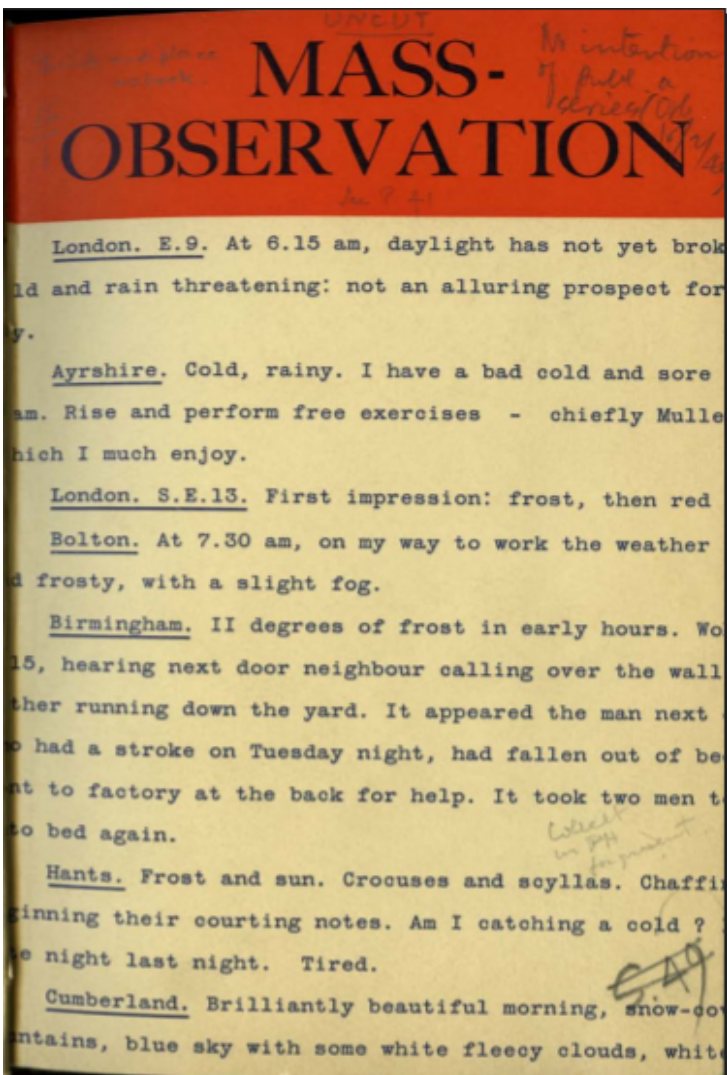


Image: (left) *Mass Observation* first pamphlet (1937) (right) Steve Beard, 'Dead London', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998

Mass Observation used surrealism to reimagine sociology or ethnography as a practice of documenting everyday life, but rather than act as recording mechanisms the action of the observer was to be an integral part of the record. As they put it, these observations, ‘though subjective, became objective because the subjectivity of the observer is one of the facts under observation’.<sup>121</sup> This, and the attempt to work with ‘thousands of observers’ and the use of contemporary media to solicit these observers’ contributions suggests a very different positioning of their printed publications than the traditional author / reader addresser / addressee relationship. Mass Observation worked with surrealist notions of correspondence and coincidence and the correspondent was the figure who mediated these chance configurations, allowing an original and illuminating articulation of them. The publication was a moment in the ensemble of environments and actors which registered facts. Publications for the MO were not only a recording mechanism, but soliciting mechanisms too. Through ‘day-surveys’ volunteers were to ‘collect a mass of data without any selective principle’, questionnaires were carried out in the street and a smaller group of anonymous observers blended into the crowd.<sup>122</sup> Jennings and Madge discussed these techniques in filmic terms describing them as ‘close-up and long shot, detail and ensemble’ and these organisational principles and their reconstruction in publications can be conceived through a logic of collage.

Indeed, *Inventory* attempted to apply the MO’s methods at a national event, not dissimilar in significance to MO’s exploration of the ‘Abdication Crisis’, Lady Diana’s death and funeral, an event they described as ‘our Mass Observation moment’.<sup>123</sup> The event, observed by a ‘mobile mob’ of *Inventory* collaborators (including Scrivener, Claydon, Abbott and Neville), led to the publication of three texts explicitly addressing the significance of Diana’s death.<sup>124</sup> In a moment of national crisis, loss, mourning even forgetfulness, therefore, *Inventory* realised, albeit on a much smaller scale, the MO’s system of correspondents and coincidences with respect to illuminating aspects of a mystifying yet communifying public event.<sup>125</sup> The novelty of both the MO and *Inventory*, or *Inventory*’s reactivation of the MO’s methods, was the application of surrealist methods to a

121 Chaney and Pickering quoted in Ibid.

122 Caleb Crain, ‘Surveillance Society: The Mass-Observation Movement and the Meaning of Everyday Life.’, *The New Yorker*, 11 September 2006, p.3.

123 Adam Scrivener, in conversation with the author, July 2016.

124 Of the three contributions addressing this event, only two were by regular *Inventory* contributors, Damian Abbott’s glossary entry ‘Paparazzi Photograph’ appearing in the issue immediately following the event, Simon Neville and Julian Walker’s thoughtful essays addressing both the mood of the crowd and the geopolitical significance of the event of Diana’s death appeared two issues subsequently. Julian Walker’s was a celebrated ‘coincidence’, a blind submission which happened to coincide with the group’s focus on this event. Simon Neville, ‘Let Her Sons Weep’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.42-45; Julian Walker, ‘Grave Goods and Teddy Bear Theives’, Ibid., pp.81-96 and Damian Abbott, ‘Paparazzi Photograph’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.34-35.

processual activity of recording, articulation and reflection which returned each time to social phenomena under the aegis of an ensemble of changing collaborators. The crucial mediation of publishing appears in these novel practices to play a specific role in the production of *facts*, and in this light it touches on something like attempts to explore new forms of mediation and new forms of objectivity in soviet factography.<sup>126</sup> However, rather than a science of production, both *Inventory* and Mass Observation turned both sociological and surrealist techniques on society itself. If ‘the production of ethnography by the people for the people’<sup>127</sup> was, for Mass Observation in an age of mass media and mass literacy, a potentially mass activity, for *Inventory* this heroic possibility was over, but nonetheless the method – to ‘turn the anthropological gaze back on ourselves’ – held out the promise of self-mediation, collective research, print as a medium of *association* and thus, at least in principle, the outside chance of an unpredictable eruption of communifying energies.

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125 Another project which explored techniques used by the MO, such as the questionnaire and verbatim publication of correspondents’ reports, was ‘Inventory Survey Project No.1’. The ‘Survey Project’ was announced through a flyer published in *Everything* magazine, Inventory Insert (Hiroshima Questionnaire), *Everything Magazine*, Issue 3.1, 1999, pp.9-10; then followed by a summary of the project in an editorial, Inventory, ‘Without Intent’, *Inventory*, Vol.3, No.3, 1999; and the publication of an anonymous response to the questionnaire in Anon., ‘Inventory Survey Project No.1’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.114-123. See also Smash this Puny Existence, Civil War Video, and Litter trails.

126 Devin Fore, ‘The Operative Word in Soviet Factography’, *October*, No.118, 2006, pp.95-131.

127 Jeremy MacClancy, ‘Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.1, No 3, September 1995, pp.495-512, p.495.



# Happiness

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## What is Happiness ?

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Once more "Competitions" are trying to find out what Bolton thinks. What does HAPPINESS mean for you and yours?

Write down what you think—Never mind about style or grammar—It's your own opinion that is wanted.

Entries to be sent to

**"COMPETITIONS,"**

**85 DAVENPORT STREET, BOLTON.**

For closing date and winners see Evening News

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### **PRIZES:**

**£2 2s.,**

**£1 1s.,**

**10/6**

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**Professor John Hilton  
WILL JUDGE THEM.**

Image: Mass Observation flyer printed to solicit correspondents on a questionnaire about happiness, circulated in Bolton c.1937



# INVENTORY

Affix stamp  
here

c/o Creative Union Hiroshima  
6-18-31 Minami-cho  
Minami-ku  
Hiroshima  
734-0007  
Japan

fold here

fold here

Please send responses to any of these questions, all of these questions, or questions, compulsions, agitations of your own to Inventory, c/o the address above, by early August, 1999.

fax: + 082 254 112  
e-mail: inventory@cwcom.net

Image: Inventory, Inventory Survey Project, double-sided insert published in *Everything Magazine*, No.3.1, 1999.

# Georges Bataille's Journals and Groups

The next sections establish the expansive models for journal production which *Inventory* derived from Georges Bataille, writer; editor; philosopher and dissident surrealist, the circles he moved through and its direct impact on the Glossary section of the journal. Subsequently I discuss how *Inventory* drew its title from the writing of Walter Benjamin and how his relationships to publishing might have informed theirs. These sections build connections towards related issues explored in Chapters 3, 4 and 6 of the thesis in which the contemporary cultural scene: the debates; political struggles and cultural formations with which *Inventory* engaged, come more clearly into view. To ground these connections I will return to the material discussed here, in later chapters, to argue that for specific cultural-political resonances between the period of Bataille's intense engagement with small experimental cultural and political groups and journals (in the 1920s and 1930s) and the period of *Inventory*'s inception and ascendancy within a milieu of small experimental cultural and political groups and journals (in the 1990s and 2000s).

In his lifetime Bataille contributed to, or directed, the formation of a number of journals and groups. The journals and groups *Documents* (1929-1930), *La Critique Sociale* (1931-1934), Society for Collective Psychology, Democratic Communist Circle and *Contre-Attaque* (1935-1936), *Acephale* and *Acéphale* (1936 to 1939) and Le College de Sociologie (1937-1939) form a sequence which traverses Bataille's interests of the inter-war period, surrealism, the arts, psychoanalysis, radical sociology, Nietzschean and Hegelian philosophy, Marxism, radical left-politics and secret societies. *Critique* (1946-ongoing) was an influential journal Bataille founded in the post-war period which continues until the present. In this context I will concentrate on Bataille's pre- or inter-war journals and groups because these are these are notable in terms of formal qualities of significance for *Inventory* and because of several important themes they establish of interest to the editorial group and finally, as is explored at length in Chapter 3, Bataille's work in these formations are one of the resources from which *Inventory* developed its ostensible method. Whilst this focus on Bataille's activities in the inter-war period concentrates my own interpretation of *Inventory* it must be stressed that the entirety of Bataille's writing, much of it only published or translated for the first time in the late-1980s and 1990s, was a resource for many contributors to *Inventory*.

## Anglophone Reception of Bataille

Effectively the anglophone reception of the legacy of Georges Bataille began with the publication in 1985 of *Visions of Excess*, a selection of his early writings in English translation edited by Allan Stoekl, this overview was then substantially widened and complexified with the English translation of Denis Hollier's anthology of unpublished writings by members of the College of Sociology in 1988, with *October's* 1986 special issue and October Books' publication of Denis Hollier's book on Bataille's writings *Against Architecture* (1992), following shortly behind.<sup>128</sup> An event organised by Birkbeck College and hosted by the Architectural Association 13-17 May 1991 appears to have galvanised the subcultural and para-academic credentials of Bataille for various cultural scenes in London. However, in the arts, the Dada and Surrealism Reviewed held at the Hayward Gallery London in 1977 had, by presenting a section on *Documents* and related publications, already established an understanding of Bataille as a 'dissident surrealist' through his work as an innovative editor and publisher. The breadth of Bataille's writings and his cultural associations is reflected in the extensive commentary and framing of his work in anglophone publishing.<sup>129</sup> While *October* encountered Bataille through the post-war French post-structuralist, and increasingly post-Marxist, theoretical tendencies of *Tel Quel*, *Inventory's* orientation was much closer to the surrealist, activist, sociological and ethnographic currents through which Bataille's initial publishing operations had been initiated. This interpretation centres especially on Bataille's inter-war work, his prolific circulation through discussion and political groups and publishing projects. This focus is undoubtedly indebted to that developed by *Inventory* contributor, surrealism scholar, translator, and sociologist, Michael Richardson.<sup>130</sup>

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128 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, (Trans. Allan Stoekl), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. In France the publication of Bataille's *Oeuvres complètes* began in 1970.

129 There is an academic and a para-academic Bataille, a subcultural and high cultural Bataille, a surrealist and an anti-surrealist Bataille, there is a communist, Marxist and a post-Marxist, even a proto-fascist Bataille, a literary and an anti-literary Bataille, an artistic Bataille, an ethnographic Bataille and a sociological Bataille. Whilst I may not have sufficient space to qualify each of these figures, what I shall try to demonstrate is the specificity and originality of *Inventory's* reception and 'use' of Bataille, its grounding in a specifically editorial, ethnographic, sociological and communist interpretation of his work and its associations.

130 Amongst those developing a sociological approach to Bataille in the pages of *Inventory*, the contribution of Michael Richardson is notable for several reasons. Richardson was a Lecturer in Sociology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London from 1990 and until 1998. His book on Bataille and his articles and translations (those specifically listed below) were shared with *Inventory* founding member, Adam Scrivener, a librarian at SOAS, c.1992-c.1999. It is conceivable that Michael Richardson played a substantial but not necessarily primary mediating role between members of *Inventory* and the heritage of Bataille's surrealism and sociology. His collaborator and co-translator on many books, Krzysztof Fijałkowski, also contributed to the journal and frequently supported the group by providing them with teaching at Norwich School of Art. This was confirmed in conversation with *Inventory* founder and editor Adam Scrivener in conversation in October 2015. Richardson gave Scrivener a copy of his own translation of Michael Surya's intellectual biography of Bataille as a gift. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. (Trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski) London; New York:

## Documents and the Spirit of Investigation

In 1929 Georges Bataille, self-styled ‘dissident surrealist’<sup>131</sup>, founded a new magazine with Georges-Henri Rivière and Carl Einstein entitled, *Documents: doctrines, archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie*, with the intention of developing the goals of surrealism with specific attention to forms of collective social life. The magazine had many connections with the emerging fields of ethnography and sociology.<sup>132</sup>

Nonetheless, the explorations which took place within the pages of *Documents*, did not remain within the professional limits of ethnography or art criticism. Not only did its contributors examine the artefacts of foreign peoples, such as non-western tribal arts, but also made a wide sweep and strong recontextualisations of the mundane and banal in western culture, from popular and industrial culture to high art. Later developed in the College of Sociology, a clandestine and haunting rejoinder to the Enlightenment-oriented ‘republic of letters’,<sup>133</sup> one of the key sites in which Bataille’s sacred sociology first took form is *Documents’* Critical Dictionary, a ‘heteroclyte’

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Verso, 2002. See also Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (Eds. and Trans.) *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2001 and *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. London; New York: Verso, 1996 and *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, op. cit. Richardson contributed to three *Inventory* issues. In 2001 Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, also an *Inventory* contributor, compiled an anthology of political tracts by surrealists emphasising the widespread collective and political engagements of a globally distributed range of surrealist factions, this was a follow up to a 1996 title which anthologised the writings of black Caribbean surrealists. Richardson characterised the College of Sociology’s approach as a form of ‘Sociology on a Razors’ Edge’ and the extensive introduction to his anthology of Bataille’s writings on surrealism, *The Absence of Myth* published in 1994, emphasises the longevity of Bataille’s surrealist and communist proclivities, and makes a forceful argument that the two terms, in Bataille’s thought, necessarily imply each other. The pair (Fijalkowski & Richardson) also translated Michael Surya’s intellectual biography of Bataille in 2002, a book which makes plain the full extent of Bataille’s practical and theoretical political engagements with left communism in the pre-World War II period. Michael Richardson’s articles for *Inventory* are ‘Paris in its Myths’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997; ‘Touched By Japan’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3 2002; ‘The Look of Collette Peignot’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005. Of these, both ‘Paris in its Myths’ and ‘The Look of Collette Peignot’ have notable connections to Georges Bataille and his circle. ‘Paris in its Myths’ refers directly to an essay by Roger Caillois, developed within his collaborations with Bataille in the College of Sociology, ‘Paris, A Modern Myth’. As the introduction to the English language anthology of Caillois’ writings, *The Edge of Surrealism*, notes: the essay shares ‘numerous similarities’ [...] with Walter Benjamin’s various studies of Baudelaire and ‘Paris Capital of the XIXth Century,’ written in the latter part of the 1930s’. ‘Introduction to “Paris, a Modern Myth”’, in Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, (Ed.) Claudine Frank, (Trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Nash). Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Richardson’s final article for *Inventory*, ‘The Look of Collette Peignot’, surveys the written work and associations of Laure (Collette Peignot’s nickname and pseudonym), lover of Bataille; editor and contributor to *La Critique Sociale*; attendee of *The College of Sociology*; and member of Bataille’s secret group Acephale, seeks to evaluate Peignot’s ‘original contribution to the history of ideas’. p.68. Michael Richardson’s essay ‘Touched By Japan’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3, 2002, contains no direct relation to Bataille or his circle, however, the discussion of cultural difference, travel and European cultural encounter with Japan is of interest for accounting for *Inventory*’s relationship to critical ethnography.

131 Georges Bataille, ‘The “Old Mole”...’, op. cit., p.40. See note #10

132 Cf. Jean Jamin, ‘Anxious Science: Ethnography as a Devil’s Dictionary’, *Visual Anthropology Review* Vol.7, No.1 (1 March 1991), pp.84–91 and Denis Hollier, ‘The Question of Lay Ethnography: The Entropological Wild Card’, Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Eds.), *Undercover Surrealism. Georges Bataille & Documents*, 2006, pp.58–64.

section of the journal containing short entries by multiple contributors on widely diverging phenomena. Initially titled, *Dictionnaire critique*, so as to recall Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697-1702), from issue four the section was simply named *Dictionnaire*. Bayle's skeptical relationship to Enlightenment thought was enthusiastic but vexed, his wayward encyclopedia provided Bataille a model of subversion evident in Voltaire's admiring quip: 'the greatest master of the art of reasoning that ever wrote, Bayle, great and wise, all systems overthrows'.<sup>134</sup> This section, I shall argue was the major influence over *Inventory*'s glossary section.

*Documents* was featured prominently in the Dada and Surrealism Reviewed exhibition conferred with its own section in which the wall-montage brought out its eclectic array of images, text and objects.<sup>135</sup> Dawn Ades detects Georges 'Bataille's presence [...] in' a publicity leaflet for the review:

The most provocative works of art, which are not yet classified, and certain eccentric productions neglected until now, will be the subject of studies as rigorous and scientific as those of archaeologists [...] envisaged here in general are the most disquieting facts, whose consequences are not yet defined. In various investigations, the occasionally absurd character of the results or the methods, far from being disguised, as it normally would be in conformance with the rules of propriety, will be deliberately underlined, as much from a hatred of platitude as from humour.<sup>136</sup>

For *Documents*, the phenomena it presented were emphatically 'evidence' not art. From 1929-1930 the short-lived journal embodied a rival claim to the mystic-scientific-psychoanalytic approach of *La Révolution Surréaliste* drawing instead on the growth of the radical claims of sociology and

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<sup>133</sup> Some sources cite Pierre Bayle, a central influence over *Documents* Critical Dictionary (through his own *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1647–1706)), as the first to translate this term from the Italian in his journal *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in 1684, Patricke Lambe, 'Critics and Skeptics in the Seventeenth-Century Republic of Letters', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol.81 No.3, pp. 271–96, (1988).

<sup>134</sup> Voltaire, 'Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake' cited at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bayle>. Voltaire's own *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764) was inspired by the encyclopedic dictionaries of Pierre Bayle, D'Alembert & Diderot, organised alphabetically, affordable and portable because "revolutionary material must be small enough for people to carry with them". Voltaire quoted in Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom*, (New York, Bloomsbury, 2005), p.298.

<sup>135</sup> The exhibition's focus on *Documents* and innovative approach to the display of text and image set a curatorial standard which was pursued in two other UK exhibitions: Fetishism, curated by Anthony Shelton and initiated by the South Bank Centre, held at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, Brighton, 29 April-2 July 1995 ; Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham, 22 July-24 September 1995 ; the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia Norwich, 9 October-10 December 1995 and Undercover Surrealism, curated by Dawn Ades, Simon Baker and Fiona Bradley, held at the Hayward Gallery, London, 11 May-3 July 2006. A book focusing specifically on *Documents*' dictionary, George Bataille et al, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, London: Atlas Press, 1995 also draws on the montage aesthetic of *Documents* itself, these exhibitions and the catalogues associated with them.

<sup>136</sup> *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, op. cit., p.231.

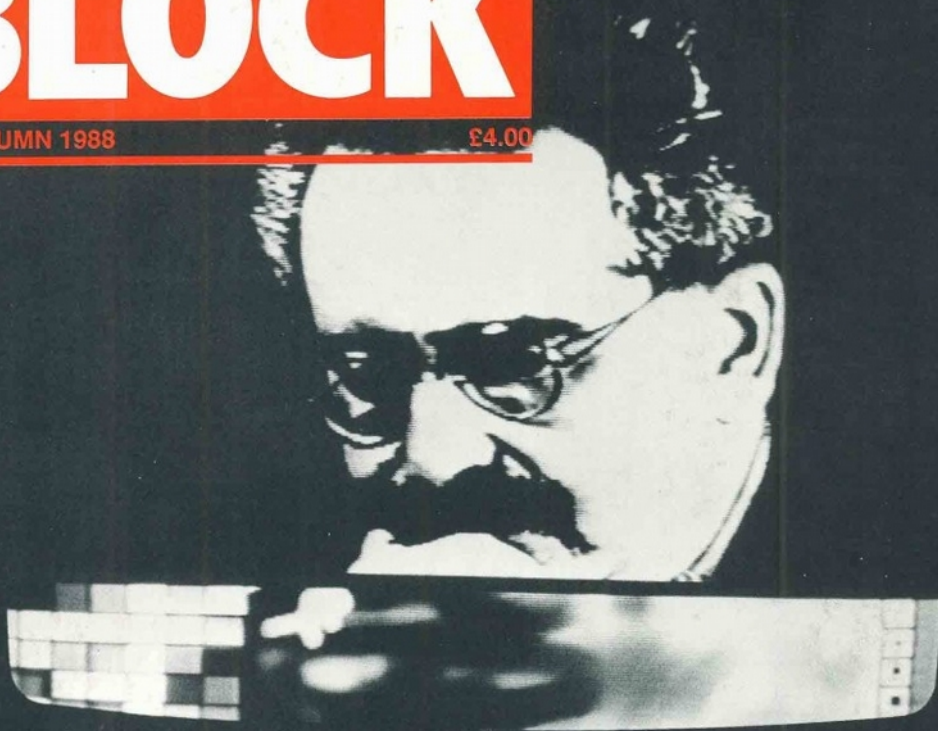
ethnography to develop effervescent and shocking studies of human society. These aspects were extended to the radical practice of community in the ventures Bataille developed subsequently and these shall be discussed in the following chapter, where *Inventory* shall be presented as deriving a method from the combination of influences of both Bataille and Walter Benjamin.



# BLOCK

14 AUTUMN 1988

£4.00



l'objet d'art à l'âge  
*électronique*

PAUL VIRILIO  
JEAN BAUDRILLARD  
STUART HALL  
MEAGHAN MORRIS  
GUY DEBORD  
GEORGE ROBERTSON  
PHIL HAYWARD  
JOHN TAGG

find	refresh	titles
save	delete	browse
directory	archive	
del group	overlay	
digital link		

Image: *Block*, Autumn, 1988, cover collage featuring an image of Walter Benjamin

# Initial Survey of Bataille's Journals and Groups

I provide here a brief summary of elements of Bataille's journals and groups in their significance for *Inventory*, which will lay the foundations for an exploration of *Inventory*'s method in Chapters 3 and 4 before returning to a specific element of *Documents* which is hereafter developed in closer detail in Chapter 5.

## *La Critique Sociale* and the Democratic Communist Circle

Georges Bataille began contributing to *La Critique Sociale* via his attendance of the Democratic Communist Circle (DCC), a group formed by dissident Bolshevik and PCF founder Boris Souvarine. Souvarine's partner Collette Peignot (aka Laure) funded the journal and shared the editorial work. Bataille's first article was published in October 1931 the same year *Documents* lost its funding. Bataille published several of his most important inter-war writings in *La Critique Sociale* and there is reason to identify the 'comrades' addressed his important essay indicating a shift from surrealism towards Marxism, 'The Use Value of the Marquis de Sade', as those in the DCC.<sup>137</sup> The DCC was not the only group Bataille was in contact with during the early 1930s.<sup>138</sup>

*La Critique Sociale* was a Marxist journal dedicated to developing independent thought and action, it drew in the membership of the DCC which by the early-1930s had become a hub of dissident anti-Stalinist Marxists, philosophers and dissident surrealists such as Jacques Baron, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Raymond Queneau. Stuart Kendall is rare in arguing for the significance of *La Critique Sociale* as rivalling that of *Documents*:

Where *Documents* brought ethnography and aesthetics into encounters with one another and with psychoanalysis, *La Critique Sociale* set about revitalizing Marxism through

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<sup>137</sup> The texts were 'The Notion of Expenditure' (Jan, 1933), 'The Problem of the State' (September, 1933), 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' (Nov 1933) and 'The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic', Allan Stoekl dates this text 1929 or 1930 and adds: 'Whilst it is clearly connected with Bataille's polemic against André Breton (and Breton's view of Sade), it also looks forward to a number of positions that Bataille developed in the *Critique Sociale* essays'. Allan Stoekl, 'A Commentary on the Texts' in Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, op. cit., p.260.

<sup>138</sup> See Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, London: Reaktion, 2007, pp.89-90.

very similar encounters. For Souvarine and his contributors, the challenge was to think the whole of society without denying themselves the insights offered by any useful set of tools.<sup>139</sup>

French philosopher and communist activist Simone Weil contributed to *La Critique Sociale*, but did not join the DCC because of an argument with Bataille over differing attitudes to revolution.

The revolution is for [Bataille] the triumph of the irrational, for me of the rational; for him a catastrophe, for me a methodical action in which one must strive to limit the damage; for him the liberation of the instincts, and notably those that are generally considered pathological, for me a superior morality. What is there in common? [. . .] How is it possible to coexist in the same revolutionary organization when on one side and the other one understands by revolution two contrary things?<sup>140</sup>

The group's political and affective affiliations had been complex, a situation Simone Weil herself alluded to in statements at the time.<sup>141</sup> The complex forcefield constituted between members of *La Critique Sociale* and the DCC is borne out not only in the strong engagement of the journal with the emergent field of research constituted by psychoanalysis, but also in a more internal sense of self-reflection legible in Weil's statement on the strong attachments within a group.<sup>142</sup> Despite illness Bataille participated in counter-demonstrations following the February 1934 Royalist and proto-fascist riots in central Paris, which some on the left perceived as a failed conservative revolution leading directly to the rise of the Popular Front government.<sup>143</sup> The events of February also precipitated a split in the DCC, which may have been as much interpersonal as political.

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139 Ibid., p.89.

140 Simone Weil quoted in Simone Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil*, Fayard, 1973, p. 306, quoted in Kendall, op. cit., pp.101-102.

141 'The Circle is a psychological phenomenon. It is made up of mutual affection, obscure affinities, in particular of repressions and contradictions between and even within its members that have not been brought out into the open.' Simone Weil, unattributed source quoted in Michel Surya, op. cit., p.170.

142 Such complexities are also more than evident in Bataille's novel *The Blue of Noon*, which features two figures closely resembling Weil (Lazare) and Collette Peignot (Dirty) who traverse the erotic and political limits of 1930s Europe. Also, in the bitter comments found in Boris Souvarine's reflection on the journal in a 1983 anthology of *La Critique Sociale* where Bataille's efforts to admit interpersonal relations, and accommodate private fears and desires, into revolutionary politics are dismissed as perverted and even fascist. Boris Souvarine, (ed.) *La Critique Sociale*, Paris: Editions de la difference, 1983.

143 Kendall, op. cit., p.105.

The value of *La Critique Sociale* as a model for *Inventory* lies in its parallel to *Documents* championing of independent research and interdisciplinary investigation of social totality. It's involvement of activists, women<sup>144</sup>, academics and non-academics and its informal non-hierarchical organisation distinguished it completely from the largely academic and commercially organised model of *Documents*, and brings it much closer to the material conditions and explicitly political orientation of *Inventory*.

## Contre-Attaque

Out of the explosion of *LCS* and the DCC and the rise of the threat of fascism and war emerged a new concord between Bataille's group of dissident surrealists and the Bretonian surrealist group who had now severed their ties with the Parti Communiste Français over its authoritarian stance and isolation of Leon Trotsky and Jacques Doriot.<sup>145</sup> Together members of the DCC, the *Masses*, elements of the pacifist journal *Clarté* and the surrealist group formed in common the anti-fascist, anti-popular front platform called Contre-Attaque: Union de Lutte des Intellectuels Révolutionnaires.<sup>146</sup> The coalition lasted only eighteen months, out of its diversity came calls for demonstrations, occasional publications and statements. *Contre-Attaque* attempted to champion working class struggle against the class compromise of the Popular Front, advocating a combination of avant-garde immediatism'.<sup>147</sup> The group's language combined elements of Marxism with concepts borrowed from Georges Sorel and Alexandre Kojève.<sup>148</sup> Indeed in this they followed and developed the schismatic Marxist-surrealist poetics primed by the short-lived journal, *Légitime défense*, published by Paris-based Martinican students.<sup>149</sup> Contre-Attaque presented a turn from the development of theory to modes of action with a rhetoric of violence that formed an opposed mirror-image of

144 This is a contested issue within *Inventory*. Whilst *Inventory*'s editors insist they made substantial efforts to include the work of women, and the contributions of Esther Leslie, Felicitas Becker, Michelle Barber, Victoria Halford, Nicoleta Esinencu, Josephine Berry and Catherine Swire are notable in the development and even transformation of *Inventory*'s core themes, these are exceptions amongst a pool of wholly male editors and mainly male contributors.

145 Many surrealists contributed to the statement 'When the Surrealists Were Right', declaration after the International Congress for the Defence of Culture August, 1935 in *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, op. cit., pp.105-111, p.108.

146 Kendall, op. cit.

147 'Counter-attack: Union of the Struggle of Revolutionary Intellectuals' in *Surrealism Against the Current*, op. cit., pp.114-117, p.115.

148 Nikolaj Lübecker d'Origny. *Community, Myth and Recognition in Twentieth-Century French Literature and Thought*, London; New York: Continuum, 2009, p.25.

149 'We are speaking to those who are not already branded as killed established fucked-up academic successful decorated decayed provided for decorative prudish opportunists' 'Légitime défense: Declaration' (1932), in Michael Richardson, (Ed.), *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, (trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson), New York: Verso, 1996.

emergent extreme right-wing groups such as *La Cagoule*.<sup>150</sup> Breton and Bataille discussed the creation of new revolutionary language within the group and advocated the creation of myths. *Contre-Attaque* attempted to embody violence through violent language, celebrated the creation of new ‘organic’ forms of community and the denunciation of parliament, party and nation.<sup>151</sup>

One of Bataille’s proposals for the new group involved the restaging of the execution of Louis XVI during the early days of the Popular Front at the Place de la Concorde on 21 January 1936.<sup>152</sup> For Bataille the Place de la Concorde was a site of specific significance since this was both where violent nationalist riots took place in February 1934 and the site where King Louis XVI was executed on 21 January 1793. The name of the square translates as ‘place of agreement’, it was briefly renamed *Place de la Révolution* after the French Revolution of 1789. Bataille’s strong association with this site suggests a reading of it as the locus of deep fractures in French society: a place of disagreement between a popular, autonomous sovereignty and that derived from and conscripted by the monarch. The ‘200 Families’, referenced in the flyer for the event refers to ‘a phrase coined by the Radical-Socialist leader Daladier to identify those at the core of the establishment who should face the justice of the people.’<sup>153</sup>

Pointing up the continuing contradictions of the double-headed sovereignty of a reigning monarch and parliament in an advanced capitalist democracy *Inventory* drew on the black humour of Bataille’s project to restore sovereignty to modern subjects through an event which instigated a game of mass football in front of Buckingham Palace using a ball fashioned with papier maché to resemble a human skull. The stunt bridged the republican traditions of Britain and France, invoking both the decapitation of Charles I in 1649 (which took place nearby at The Banqueting House on Whitehall) and the decapitation of French nobles including Louis XVI during the French revolution

150 Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

151 ‘What will decide the destiny of society today is the organic creation of a vast composition of disciplined, fanatic forces capable of exerting a pitiless authority in the coming days.’ Georges Bataille et al, ‘Contre-Attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires’ in Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault (ed.), *Œuvres complètes Vol.I*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, p.380 quoted in Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, op. cit., p.126.

152 Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Leiris, Alastair Brotchie, Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, Meyer Barash, and André Masson, *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, Ed. Marina Galletti, London: Atlas press, 2017, p.20, p.84 and p.119.

153 *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, op. cit., p.119. In a lecture on the figure of the King and Executioner at the College of Sociology Caillois stated “‘in the popular conscience the decapitation of the king appears as the pinnacle of the revolution” which, one would have thought, makes it indistinguishable from a collective representation, and thus indeed a social fact.’ Ibid., p.364.

of 1789, and the tradition in the UK of mob football as a catalyst for social protest.<sup>154</sup> *Inventory*'s game spoofed a post-historical or revisionist spirit of myth, rumour and reenactment widespread in the postmodern '80s and '90s but in a period where mass unrest was returning to threaten the sanctioned zones of commerce and tourism at the centre of the city.

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<sup>154</sup> In 1699, 'an estimated 1,100 rioters attacked drainage works and enclosures in Deeping Level, just north of Peterborough', 'Under Colour & pretence of Foot ball playing'. Heather Falvey, 'Custom, resistance and politics: local experiences of improvement in early modern England', PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2007, pp. 356-7. See also, James Walvin, *The People's Game: The History of Football Revisited*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1994. Walvin indicates several further examples of 18th anti-enclosure riots orchestrated under the guise of football games, for example in Winchelsea. where players annually try to capture an object known as 'The Frenchman's Head', see: <http://www.winchelsea.net/community/game.htm>; and a report during the years leading up to the civil war (1642) describes a crowd playing with the head of an executed Catholic priest: <http://historyweird.com/1642-mob-football-catholic-priest-head/>





Image: (left) Contre-Attaque flyer for an anniversary celebration of the beheading of the Louis XVI, 21 January, 1936. (right) Riots in the Place de la Concorde Paris 7 February 1934

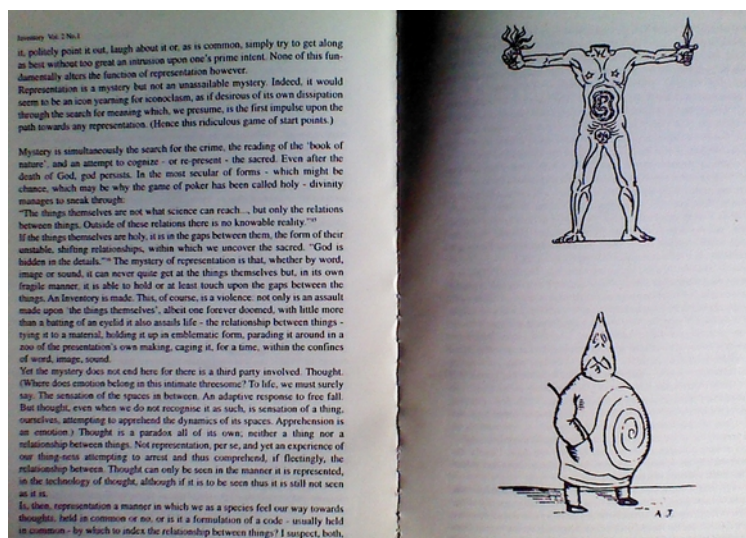


Image: Illustration to Nick Norton, 'Bring Me the Head of Georges Bataille'

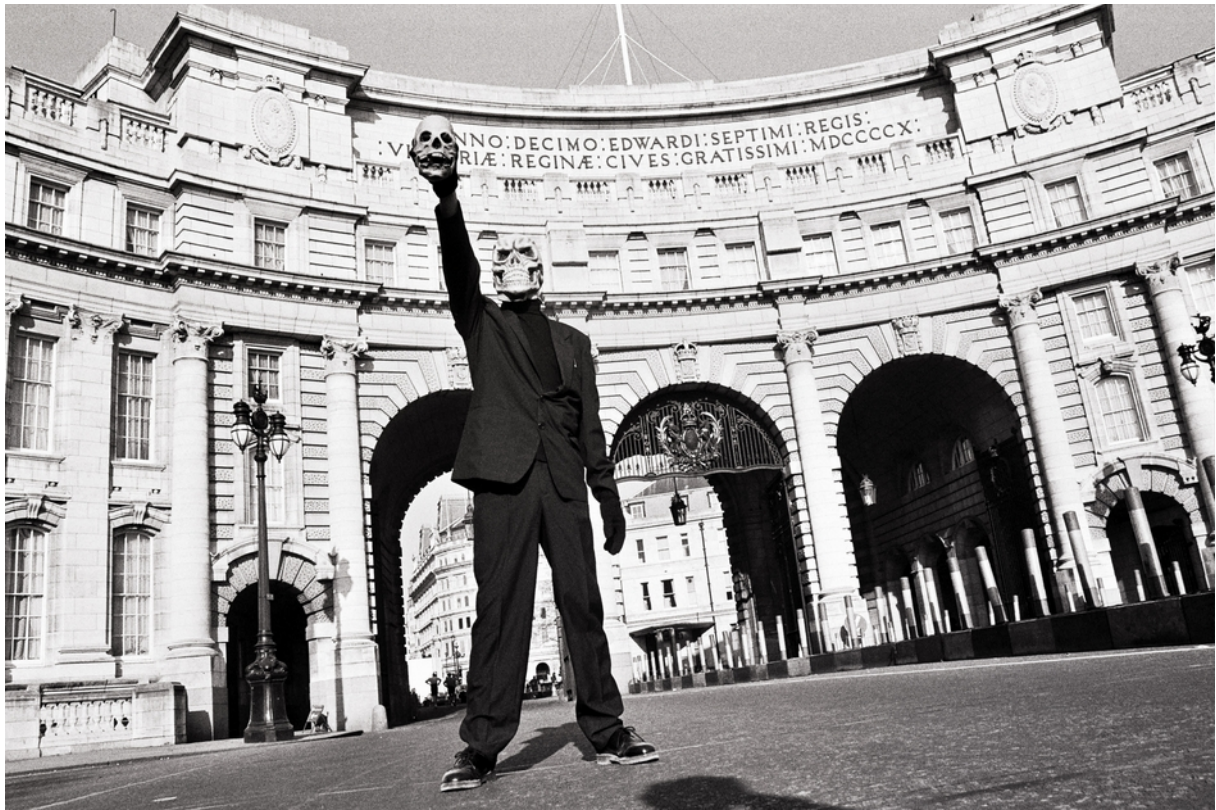


Newspaper image from the 1990 Strangeways Prison riots, reproduced in Howard Slater, 'New Acephale', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997

1. CHANCE  
against mass
2. COMMUNAL UNITY  
against the imposture of the individual
3. AN ELECTIVE COMMUNITY  
distinct from the community of blood, earth and interests
4. THE RELIGIOUS POWER OF TRAGIC SELF-OFFERING  
against military power founded on greed and constraint
5. THE FUTURE IN MOTION, DESTROYING LIMITS  
against the past will to immobility
6. THE TRAGIC LAWBREAKER  
against humble victims
7. THE INEXORABLE CRUELTY OF NATURE  
against the degrading image of a good god
8. FREE AND LIMITLESS LAUGHTER  
against every form of hypocritical piety
9. 'LOVE OF FATE', EVEN THE MOST HARSH  
against the abdications of pessimists and of the  
anguished
10. THE ABSENCE OF GROUND AND OF EVERY FOUNDATION  
against the appearance of stability
11. JOY BEFORE DEATH  
against all immortality<sup>25</sup>

Image: Acephale, 'Eleven Attacks', 29 September, 1938 (reproduced in Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, op. cit., p.138)





Images: *Inventory*, *Mob Football on the Mall*, 2003. Photographs by Max Reeves, personal collection

# Acephale and the College of Sociology

After Contre-Attaque fell apart Bataille again parted company with Breton, but the movement he sought to realise in subsequent groups was a peculiar combination of withdrawal countermanded by ambitious opening out towards publics. Acéphale, a secret society and later *Acéphale* an eponymous political philosophical journal; the College of Sociology, a para-academic informal meeting, 'research group', lecture and discussion series.<sup>155</sup> Benjamin Noys argues, with hindsight, that the trinity of Acéphale, *Acéphale* and the College constitutes the outcome of a continually developed aspect of Bataille's politics, the politics of group formation.<sup>156</sup>

The confusing but distinct identities of Acéphale the secret group and *Acéphale* the journal may have sanctioned the sometimes indistinct boundaries between *Inventory* journal 'as the central research spine' and *Inventory* as a 'collective enterprise intent on carving out an interdisciplinary space from which to [...] engage with, and act upon, a variety of sociological and political situations.'<sup>157</sup> The informal organisation of *Inventory* contributors and contributing editors as a network operating behind a strong institutional but anonymous identity (the journal) allowed the group to traverse a wide range of institutional and para-institutional contexts in different formations and involving a constantly changing range of collaborators.<sup>158</sup> The image of Acéphale loomed large and frequently in *Inventory*'s vocabulary, both in written contributions and in numerous projects by the editors who made the journal.<sup>159</sup> Alan Stoekl understands Acephale as the outcome of a sequence of negations carried out through Bataille's engagement in prior journals and groups.

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155 'Every two weeks conferences took place in the back room of a bookstore in the Rue Gay-Lussac. An eclectic audience crowded in and participated actively in the debates. [...] We certainly agreed on the primary if not decisive importance of the sacred in the emotions of individuals as well as in the structure of societies. With this perspective I strove to apply to the study of the phenomenon in the contemporary world what I had managed to retain from my reading of Durkheim and from the teachings of Mauss and Dumézil, which I mingled bizarrely with fantasies drawn from fiction.' Roger Caillois, 'The Collège de Sociologie: Paradox of an Active Sociology', Trans. Susan Lanser, *SubStance*, Vol. 4, No. 11/12, 1975, pp.61-64, p.62.

156 'Bataille not only thought community but he also experimented with community as a practice, and these experiments had high political stakes. Throughout the 1930s Bataille was involved with the extraparlimentary left and its opposition to fascism. He was [...] a gauchiste. A gauchiste is an extreme leftist who also contests the idea of the revolutionary party in favour of action by the masses. [...] The political communities with which he was involved refused the party form and would be central to his reflections on community. Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille a Critical Introduction*, London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2000, p.8.

157 This could also equally be said for the print/corporate pairing of *Art-Language* and *Art & Language*. Quotations from Adam Scrivener, 'Curriculum Vitae', op. cit.

158 This loose self-organisation shall be subject to further examination in Chapter 5.

159 Cf. Nick Norton, 'Bring Me the Head of Georges Bataille', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997; Howard Slater, 'New Acéphale', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997; Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London' *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003.

Myth, as Bataille states [...] is the way open to man after the failure of art, science (and scientific notions of causation), and politics to reach these lower – and more ‘essential’ – human drives, and after their failure as well to lead to a paradoxically rent but ‘true’ existence.<sup>160</sup>

The figure of Acéphale was reinterpreted as a poster – the image of a footballer pulling his shirt over his head during a match celebration – for the mass football on the Mall event. Another mass media image, of a sole hooded prisoner on the roof of Strangeways Prison, was used to illustrate Howard Slater’s text ‘New Acéphale’.<sup>161</sup> Slater’s text is a melancholy meditation on the possibility of community in the cramped spaces produced by carceral capitalism which draws on Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot’s dialogue about Bataille’s group experiments.<sup>162</sup> There is also the obvious possibility of reading ‘new acephale’ as a proposition encoding *Inventory* itself, though I shall continue to explore this text’s resonance with the journal’s distributed community, this reading is questionable if we consider the text’s appearance in other formats and publications.<sup>163</sup> Slater’s text in turn perhaps riffed on a earlier more playful text by Nick Norton, which aligns an image of Acéphale with Alfred Jarry’s illustration of Pere Ubu, suggesting a certain bathos and nightmarish banality (shades of Donald Trump) conferred upon the desublimated being ‘unaware of prohibition’ invoked in the closing quotation drawn from Bataille’s formula for Acéphale.<sup>164</sup>

## Sacred Sociology

However, this view of Bataille turning completely from science and politics does not completely ring true, if we understand the College of Sociology as a parallel and public project. The College of Sociology on the other hand opens to the more indistinct phenomenon of the ‘Invisible College’, first mentioned in Rosicrucian pamphlets of the 17th century. The College suggests an international, para-institutional intellectual exchange between occultists, alchemists, philosophers and men of

160 Pierre Joris, ‘Translator’s Preface’, Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, (Trans. Pierre Joris), Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988, p.xviii.

161 Howard Slater, ‘New Acéphale’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.71-75.

162 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*. Trans. Pierre Joris, Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1988 and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Peter Conner (Ed.), (Trans. Peter Conner, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

163 E.g. the version of the text signed ‘New Acephale c/o HMP High Point Stradishall, Suffolk’, archived at <https://darksickmusic.com/c8/archive/09-97/breakflow/breakflow.html> [Accessed 20/04/2018].

164 ‘Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison, he has found beyond himself not God, who is prohibition but a being who is unaware of prohibition [...] his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.’ Georges Bataille quoted in ‘Bring Me the Head of Georges Bataille’, op. cit., p.102.



science, an open conspiracy offering its correspondents anonymity and freedom from religious or state censorship. It therefore forms a clandestine and haunting rejoinder to the Enlightenment-oriented ‘republic of letters’.<sup>165</sup> The College was oriented towards the study, or even generation of myth, but this was developed on a sociological basis. Within it Bataille proposed a ‘sociology of the sacred’:

Sacred sociology may be considered the study not only of religious institutions but of the entire communifying movement of society. Hence [...] it contemplates all human activities – sciences, arts, and technology – insofar as they have a communifying value, in the active sense of the word, in so far as they are the *creators* of unity.<sup>166</sup>

This text was presented as a lecture by Bataille and Caillois to the inaugural meeting of the College on Saturday, 20 November, 1937. The discourse of the sacred, its ‘primary if not decisive importance’, developed highly personal and psychological aspects within Bataille’s circle, but its deployment as a category for the study of universal collective social life originated in the sociology of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.<sup>167</sup> *Inventory* directly invoked this first public announcement of the College’s project in their first published text, an editorial entitled ‘For a Sociology’, this then provides one of the central conjunctures from which *Inventory*’s method develops and is the subject of the subsequent Chapter.<sup>168</sup>

## ***Documents*’ Critical Dictionary and *Inventory*’s Glossary**

One of the key sites in which the foundations of Bataille’s sacred sociology first took form is *Documents*’ Critical Dictionary, a ‘heteroclyte’ section of the journal containing short entries by multiple contributors on widely diverging phenomena. Initially titled, *Dictionnaire critique*, so as to recall Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697-1702), from issue four the section

165 Some sources cite Pierre Bayle, a central influence over *Documents* Critical Dictionary (through his own *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1647–1706)), as the first to translate this term from the Italian in his journal *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in 1684, Patricke Lambe, ‘Critics and Skeptics in the Seventeenth-Century Republic of Letters’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol.81 No.3, pp. 271–96, (1988).

166 George Bataille, ‘Sacred Sociology’, in Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp.73–84.

167 Quotation from Roger Caillois, and (Trans.) Susan Lanser. 1975. ‘The Collège de Sociologie: Paradox of an Active Sociology.’ *SubStance* 4 (11/12): pp.61–64, p.62. Michael Richardson’s article ‘The Look of Collette Peignot’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, explores Peignot’s concept of the sacred, ‘a long way from the Durkheimian notion of the sacred although its roots are doubtless to be found there.’ p.68 Peignot’s essay was written as a response to Michel Leiris’s contribution to the founding of the College of Sociology, ‘The Sacred in Everyday Life’, op. cit.

168 *Inventory*, ‘For a Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5.

was simply named *Dictionnaire*. Bayle's skeptical relationship to Enlightenment thought was enthusiastic but vexed, his wayward encyclopedia provided Bataille a model of subversion evident in Voltaire's admiring quip: 'the greatest master of the art of reasoning that ever wrote, Bayle, great and wise, all systems overthrows'.<sup>169</sup> Following his instincts for forms of 'base materialism' Bataille authored entries on the terms: Aesthete, Architecture, Black Birds, Camel, Dust, Eye (2. Cannibal Delicacy), Factory Chimney, Formless, Kali, Materialism, Metamorphosis (3. Wild Animals), Misfortune, Mouth, Museum, Slaughterhouse, Space (1. Questions of Propriety).

*Inventory* drew direct inspiration from *Documents*' and particularly from its Dictionary section which became the model for the Glossary, a section which appeared in almost every issue of *Inventory* from its second issue. The Glossary did not, as in Gustav Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas* (1911–13) or Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* (1906) take the form of short aphorisms, or only very rarely, instead like *Documents* entries take the form of short essays, sometimes with several authors contributing multiple entries. As in *Documents* individual glossary entries were frequently illustrated with a single image, and in longer entries a run of images was often arranged dynamically in relation to the entries' columns.<sup>170</sup>

In a catalogue essay for the Hayward's Undercover Surrealism exhibition, which expanded the 1977 Dada and Surrealism exhibition by creating a show primarily drawn from art works and writing featured in *Documents*, Michael Richardson summarised Bataille's approach.

For Bataille a dictionary begins when it gives the tasks rather than the meanings of words. As an example, Bataille gives us his definition of formless, seen as the epitome of what eludes classification. [...] this definition was not in Bataille's mind when the Dictionary began, but was shaped precisely through the developmental process of the Dictionary itself. [...] It is in this manner that the Dictionary took shape: as an edifice lacking architecture but emerging through the process of construction from the ground up, like a medieval cathedral or a minaret. As such it would become 'haunted', shaped not by human intention but by the very process of its own enactment.<sup>171</sup>

169 Voltaire, 'Poem on the Lisbon Earthquake' cited at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bayle>. Voltaire's own *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764) was inspired by the encyclopedic dictionaries of Pierre Bayle, D'Alembert & Diderot, organised alphabetically, affordable and portable because "revolutionary material must be small enough for people to carry with them". Voltaire quoted in Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in Pursuit of Freedom*, (New York, Bloomsbury, 2005), p.298.

170 Two key examples are Adam Scrivener, 'Photo booth', *Inventory*, Vol.2, No.1, 1997, pp.73-79 and Adam Scrivener 'Remote Control', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.91-92.

171 Michael Richardson, 'Dictionary', *Undercover Surrealism. Georges Bataille & Documents*, op. cit., p.92.

The dizzying architecture of established knowledge and its downfall is explored on occasions across *Inventory* too numerous to catalogue here – the Glossary is its anti-catalogue. However, such metaphors, and their exploration also leaked out elsewhere in the journal and into the practical projects *Inventory* enacted in the space of the city. The glossary to *Inventory* Vol.3 No.3 includes an entry entitled ‘Glossary’ authored by Nick Norton.

Stating the obvious with a pedant’s passion for paradox while hoping that one will be able in these tiny spaces, opened up by contradiction (or the merely contrary), to stake a claim on some portion of a reality. To imagine that against all the evidence, some clearly doctored, imagination will hold as an equal with fact. To write a glossary is to erect a tent over a fact or definition. A tent always imagines itself as a castle.<sup>172</sup>

Like Bataille’s entry for formless, the entry explores the potentially bewildering overturning that the short prose form can enact when positioned in the cloak of a systemic edifice. The *Documents* entry on ‘Formless’, was directly quoted by Richard Bradbury in a contribution entitled ‘Granted Ground’.<sup>173</sup> Bradbury’s essay takes the form of a ‘roaming around amongst words’: the lengthwise or longitudinal thread of an essay (the warp) is punctuated by the weft of keyword arranged in the left margin and separated from the main text by a vertical line inscribed on the page. Experiments such as these are further explored in the form of a survey of key terms from both *Inventory* and *Documents* in Chapter 5.

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172 Nick Norton, ‘Glossary’, in ‘Glossary’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, p.17.

173 Richard Bradbury, ‘Granted Ground’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.43-73, p.53.

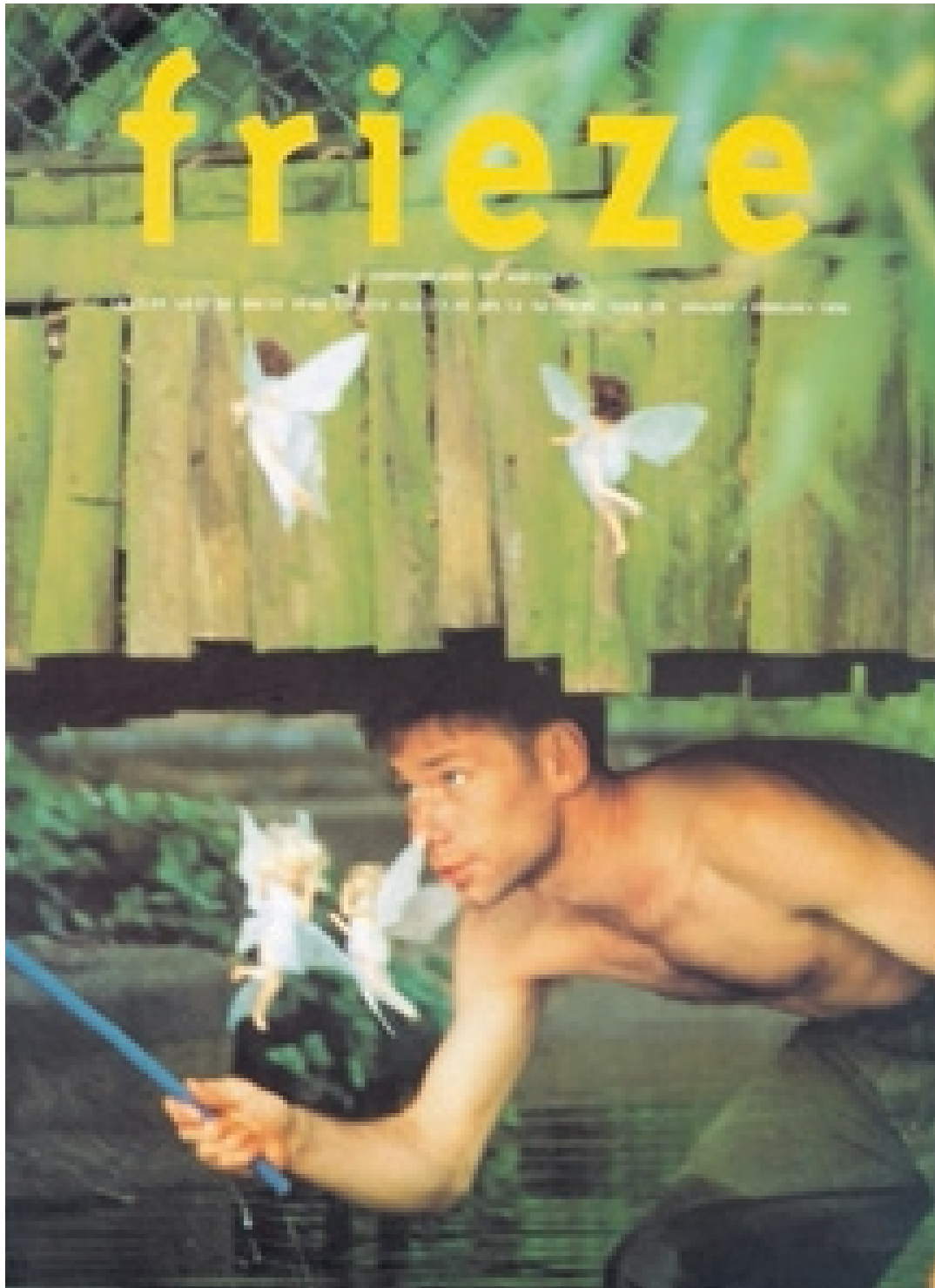


Image: *frieze*, cover image featuring work by Matt Collishaw, Jan–Feb 1996

## Post-War Models of Publishing Practice for Inventory

While *Inventory* reached back to the 1920s and '30s to enact related transformations by drawing on surrealist currents some of the sites and practices where John Roberts understands similar contestations of the intellectual division of labour in society in the post-war period as developing was within the pedagogical work in art school and publishing practices of Art & Language, around the magazine *Block* – central to the dissemination of new art histories – based in the Art History department at Middlesex<sup>174</sup> and in diffuse 'self-developing communities of intellect'<sup>175</sup> such as the example of St Martin's Group. An important tension, arguably omitted by Roberts, was a countervailing tendency within the 'new art history' which championed sociological and anthropological approaches derived from writings by Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall in the journals *Ten8*, *Camerawork* and *Studio International*.<sup>176</sup> Also unexamined in Roberts' discussion was the example of the journal *October*. *October* was innovative in championing and developing the new art history, begun in the UK by T.J. Clark and others<sup>177</sup>, and granting a prominence to artists' writings, which could be understood to represent a reconfiguration of the relationship between artist and critic and an emergent tendency towards a *primarily* academic contestation of the intellectual division of labour in society. Responding, entirely negatively, to the glossy, commercial and pseudo-intellectuality of contemporary art magazines such as *frieze*, I argue *Inventory* drew on an inter-war nexus of the avant-garde engaged, somewhat differently, by Roberts and *October* to develop their own writerly ethos, but focused most keenly on the legacies of the surrealist diaspora in their search for models of writing and publishing. I shall briefly sketch the positions of *October*, *The Fox* and *Art-Language* journals and their relevance to *Inventory* before returning to Robert's framework and its implications for *Inventory*.

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174 'The hugely influential *BLOCK* magazine was founded in 1979 and ran for eleven years. Edited by Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Melinda Mash, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner, *BLOCK* attempted to address the problem of the social, economic and ideological dimensions of the arts in society, and offered a challenge to a conventional understanding of art history.' ADRI page on Middlesex University web pages, available, <http://adri.mdx.ac.uk/block> [accessed 30 March, 2018].

175 'Writerly Artists', op. cit., pp.17-18.

176 Neil Mullholland, *The Cultural Devolution: Art in Britain in the Late Twentieth Century*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, pp.45-48.

177 Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p.13.

Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

# OCTOBER

1

Michel Foucault

Richard Foreman

Noël Burch

Richard Howard

Rosalind Krauss

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

and John Johnston

Jean-Claude Lebensztejn

Hollis Frampton

*"Ceci n'est pas une pipe"*

*The Carrot and the Stick*

*To the Distant Observer:*

*Towards a Theory of Japanese Film*

*The Giant on Giant-Killing*

*Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*

*Gravity's Rainbow and the Spiral Jetty*

*Star*

*Notes on Composing in Film*

Spring 1976

\$3.00

Image: *October*, No.1, Spring, 1976



## October

*October* was founded by a group of young art critics and art historians, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe who worked as editorial staff at *Artforum*. The journal first took shape as a 'stack of glued and trimmed rectangular sheets' distributed via Jaap Rietman's Soho bookshop in New York City.<sup>178</sup> From this humble beginning *October* was quickly picked up for distribution by MIT Press and developed a status as the preeminent vehicle for serious art criticism for two, or even three, decades.<sup>179</sup> Clear resonances with *Inventory* in terms of self-presentation are evident, the prominence granted to artists writings and some very specific overlapping of theoretical concerns. *October*'s work on Bataille, Benjamin, Surrealism<sup>180</sup> was of direct interest to *Inventory* and I shall, in the subsequent chapter, develop a close relation between *Inventory*'s method of practice and prominent *October* contributor Hal Foster's paradigm of the 'Artist as Ethnographer'.<sup>181</sup> Another canonical text associated with *October* is Benjamin Buchloh's essay, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', this, a critique of conceptual art as an aesthetics of administration, it could be argued had an mediating role in *Inventory*'s exploration of both publishing and the administrative means of their own white collar workplaces as a form of 'rough conceptualism'.<sup>182</sup> However, in distinct contrast, from its self-organised beginnings *October* drifted into an established world of academic art history very far from *Inventory*'s concerns and form of organisation. Whereas other publications I compare to *Inventory* here were generally artist-run, self-organised and self-published, *October*'s critical 'independence' was of another order, established in opposition to the conservative centre of the art press, art market, critical and academic establishment, but, perhaps, in reality not very far from it,

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178 Roger Conover, 'October 1-100: Some Particulars' (2000), in Gwen Allen (ed.), *The Magazine*. London: Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery: The MIT Press, 2016, p.37.

179 Adam Scrivener cited *October* as a key influence on *Inventory* in conversation with the author July 2017.

180 Notably the special issues: on Georges Bataille (*October* 36 Spring 1986: George Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-knowing); on Walter Benjamin's Moscow Diary (*October* 35 Moscow Diary by Walter Benjamin; of a number of monographs published by October editors and contributors most significant are perhaps Hal Foster's monograph on surrealism's relationship to the commodity, Foster, Hal. *Compulsive Beauty*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008 and Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain-Bois attempt to develop Bataille's category of 'l'informe' (formless) into an art historical paradigm Bois, Yve-Alain, and Rosalind E. Krauss. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York : Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books, 1997.

181 An essay which did not appear in *October*., but was later republished in the anthology *The Return of the Real*, by the journal's book series, October Books.

182 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions'. *October* 55 (Winter 1990): pp.105-143. The theme of rough conceptualism and the arts of bureaucracy are developed in Chapter 4 on Info Centre and Chapter 6 on The Journal as Form.

and as it has turned out, more invested in a renewal of those forms than complete independence or difference from them.<sup>183</sup>

*October* developed out of a controversy at *Artforum* around an intervention by artist Lynda Benglis.<sup>184</sup> Whilst themselves critical of the analogies Benglis was exploring and the use of an advertisement to do so, the three founding editors of *October* left *Artforum* overnight, distancing themselves from the aspects of the magazine which Benglis had criticised. Annette Michelson's understanding of Benglis' intervention worried 'that the magazine itself is the brothel within which things are for sale. And I did not see myself as the inhabitant of an intellectual brothel.'<sup>185</sup> Against the magazine as 'intellectual brothel' *October* emphasised its critical and intellectual autonomy from the market.

Long working experience with major art journals has convinced us of the need to restore to the criticism of painting and sculpture, as to that of the other arts, an intellectual autonomy seriously undermined by emphasis on extensive reviewing and lavish illustration.<sup>186</sup>

Restoring criticism laid emphasis on the essay form, a refusal to publish reviews or gallery advertisements and a moderate approach to images: 'plain of aspect, its illustrations determined by considerations of textual clarity.'<sup>187</sup> This spirit of visual austerity, even anti-opticality, would be similarly pursued by *Inventory*. If the return to the essay as form was perhaps most prominently championed by *October* first, it depended on a complex rehistoricisation of earlier avant-garde traditions of journal publishing which *Inventory* would later develop into a singular site of interdisciplinary practice.<sup>188</sup> Neither *October* or *Inventory* published 'reviews'. Describing the relatively austere design of *October*, Gwen Allen validates the close relation between paired down design, artists' intellectual contribution and the focus on 'critical discourse' that the new journal hoped to engender.

The subdued design, consisting of elegant black Baskerville lettering on a cream background with the issue number in red, was a dead ringer for the Parisian avant-garde

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183 The relationship between their own critical attention and the price of artworks has particularly dogged *October* writers. Cf. Rosalind Krauss, interview in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, New York; London: Soho; Turnaround, 2004, pp.414-415.

184 Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011, p.25.

185

Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.26.

186 Editors, 'About October', *October*, no. 1 (1976), p.5.

187 *Ibid.*

188 One which arguably pushed beyond *October*'s concentration on the relation between criticism and art.

literary journal *Tel Quel* an homage that signaled the kind of intensive critical discourse that *October* sought to foster. In addition to texts by art historians, critics, and theorists, including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Douglas Crimp, and Craig Owens, *October* published texts by artists, filmmakers, and writers including Eisenstein, Daniel Buren, Tricia Brown, Laurie Anderson, Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, Samuel Beckett, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, demonstrating the intersection between theory and practice that the publication sought to chart and advance.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> *Artists' Magazines*, op. cit., p.28.

Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics

# OCTOBER 36

## GEORGES BATAILLE

*Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice,  
Nietzsche, Un-Knowing*

translated by Annette Michelson  
with essays by Rosalind Krauss,  
Annette Michelson, and Allen S. Weiss

\$6.00/Spring 1986

Published by the MIT Press

# TEL QUEL

Francis Ponge, *La Figue (sèche)*  
Claude Simon, *La poursuite*  
Jean Cayrol, *La presque île*  
Jean Lagrolet, *L'écrivain désamorcé*  
Boisrouvray, *Une vallée sous les nuages*  
Philippe Sollers, *Requiem*

Pensez-vous avoir un don d'écrivain?  
32 réponses à une enquête.

Virginia Woolf, *Le moment : soir d'été*  
Jacques Coudol, *Le voyage d'hiver*  
Jean-René Huguenin, *Adieu*

Jean-Edern Hallier, *Un visage à part*  
Jean Thibaudau, *L'attentat*  
Renaud Matignon, *Flaubert et la sensibilité moderne*  
Francis Ponge, *Proème*

Albert Camus  
*Notes de lecture*

Printemps 1960

1

Image: (left) *October*, Special Issue on George Bataille, No.36, Spring 1986 (right) *Tel Quel*, No.1, Spring, 1960

Allen's list assembles many notable artist-writers or filmmaker-writers, crucially these artists' writings are not presented as exceptions, but in a continuum or on a shared plane of relevance with philosophers and cultural theorists in terms of the 'intersection between theory and practice' which *October* charged itself with exploring.<sup>190</sup> It is this establishment of artists' writing (pioneering translation and reappraisal of writings by proponents of the inter-war avant-gardes surrealism, futurism and constructivism) on a plane of equivalence with theory in general is the primary element *Inventory* drew from *October*. Correlating to these developments, even if it emanated from art-criticism and art-history, were the empowering equalising consequences for the writing of artists.

This does not exclude accommodating or supporting the interpretive schemas of professional art historians and critics, but, rather, that the voice of the artist is at no point subordinate to these schemas, meaning that, in any ensuing dialogue, the artists own voice is substantive rather than merely exotic or exoteric.<sup>191</sup>

Whilst *Inventory* drew directly on debates staged within the pages of *October* and ancillary publishing ventures, here I wish to emphasise that the credibility granted to artist's writings licensed *Inventory*'s own efforts 'to position themselves in relation to a past in which they could invest and identify with.'<sup>192</sup>

## ***Art & Language and The Fox***

The artist-group Art & Language constitute a seminal and singular practice informing contemporary art in the UK and post-conceptual art globally. Forming a shape-changing 'intellectual network'<sup>193</sup>, 'around a community of ideas' the group Founding an eponymous journal in 1969 *Art-Language*, welcoming contributions from core members of this network and initially outsiders, the increasingly expansive practice, encompassing exhibitions, performances, posters, installations, public art works

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>191</sup> John Roberts, 'Writerly Artists: Conceptual Art, Bildung, and the Intellectual Division of Labour'. *Rab-Rab: Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries into Art*, no. 01 (2014): pp.9-20, p.14.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>193</sup> 'woven by the artists who were part of the collective, including Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, Ian Burn, Joseph Kosuth, Philip Pilkington, Mel Ramsden and Dave Rushton, together with art historian Charles Harrison. In the early 1970s, Art & Language also included an extensive list of New York-based contributors, most especially Michael Corris, Andrew Menard, Kathryn Bigelow and Preston Heller.' Museu de Arte Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), 'Press Release: Art & Language Uncompleted: The Philippe Méaille Collection', Barcelona: MACBA, 2014, available, [https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20140916/ENG\\_NdP\\_Art\\_\\_Language.pdf](https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20140916/ENG_NdP_Art__Language.pdf)

and songs, returned again and again to discourse and linguistic acts anchored but not isolated to its journal.

Through this practice, conversation – which is often considered a commentary on labour – becomes the workplace itself; in other words, it takes the place of the art object rather than being a vehicle that signifies the work.<sup>194</sup>

The ‘conversation’ and journal allowed the undefined actors behind the moniker Art & Language to write and produce works whilst frustrating any determinate framing of their work as art work. Within this practice, which sought to test, criticise and refine the modernist proposition of art as a system, writing and language became the key area through which the group exercised challenges to, and parodies of the existing boundaries of art as defined by art criticism.

writing theoretical texts in a tone that oscillates between academic philosophy in the analytic or Anglophone tradition and a parody thereof. This writing often postulated hypothetical art-works or imagined situations involving art and then speculated about them in detail to arrive at a variety of provisional conclusions. Fairly quickly, it ceased to be a discourse subsidiary to art objects and art situations real or fictive and became itself the main thrust of Art & Language’s practice when *Art-Language* took over for a number of years as the collective’s main outlet.<sup>195</sup>

*Inventory* exhibit direct acknowledgement of *Art-Language* through the text-based cover layout which worked as a template for the complete run of the journal. Secondly, the primacy of text to the journal and eclecticism of textual formats (lists, reports, essays, diagrams, indexes, letters, emails) reflected similar experiments by Art & Language. Beyond these semblances, *Art-Language* and *Inventory* would appear to part ways significantly, since *Inventory* by no means restricted themselves to writing about art, its conditions or the limits of its concept, rather instead they used the journal as a platform to launch an ambitious and wide-ranging interrogation of extra-artistic social phenomena. However, as a journal produced by artists, and not an art work, *Inventory* could be understood to take ‘the place of the art object rather than being a vehicle that signifies the work’<sup>196</sup> and therefore *Art-Language* and the expanded, but difficult to delimit, group practice of Art

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194 Ibid.

195 Robert Bailey, *Art & Language International: Conceptual Art Between Art Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p.15.

196 ‘Press Release: Art & Language Uncompleted: The Philippe Méaille Collection’, op. cit.



& Language provides a crucial conceptual and organisational model for *Inventory*. These appear initially distant from *Inventory* but in fact the two groups share a whole host of occasional appearances in publications, indicating not only the widespread and diverse influence of Art & Language on *Inventory*'s peers but also that these peers conceived of *Inventory* and *Art-Language* as very much part of a similar framework of artists' publishing and writing.<sup>197</sup> Nonetheless, as I shall explore in this section, engagement with *The Fox*, a publishing venture which developed out of international conversations initiated by Art & Language, allows some pivotal differences to emerge which help develop *Inventory*'s specific orientation.

*Art-Language* and *The Fox* were initially overlapping initiatives which sprang out of the formation of an English and then International group or network around the art-making and art-writing collective Art & Language. First published in 1975 *The Fox* emerged in New York out of a sense of alienation with the increasingly narrow line taken by the earlier journal *Art-Language*, founded in 1969.<sup>198</sup> Though both journals addressed the task of developing 'a forum for conversation about how best to organize artistic practice relative to the current state of the art world', *The Fox* established itself specifically to broach the perceived tendency of the development of a party line within *Art-Language*, by self-consciously '[i]nviting plurality and even contradiction'.<sup>199</sup> However, the organisations were neither identical, nor were they entirely separable. The picture is complexified by the knowledge that participants of these separate publishing initiatives overlapped within the broader group of Art & Language. Therefore rather than understanding these two initiatives as merely competitive and rivalrous they in fact served to perform two organisational tendencies, one 'centripetal' and one 'centrifugal' – one open, the other closed. In this light, it is necessary to understand the naming of *The Fox*, through its specific allusion to Isiah Berlin's gloss of Greek poet Archilochus, as a performative gesture part antagonistic part mimetic.

For there exists a great chasm between those, on the one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral

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197 *Inventory* appeared alongside Art & Language in *Everything Magazine*, op. cit.; *Frozen Tears*, op. cit. and Jakob Jakobsen & Henrietta Heise, *Infotainment*, London: Info Centre, No.2, 1998.

198 Ibid., p.109.

199 Ibid., p.110.

or aesthetic principle; these last lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes.<sup>200</sup>

## The Magazine as Intersubjective Community Space

*The Fox* sought to extend the conversations begun within Art & Language outwards to unknown others, possible collaborators or critics. Writing in its initial mission statement 'It is the purpose of our journal to establish some kind of community practice. [...] those who are interested, curious [...] are encouraged, even urged, to contribute'.<sup>201</sup> Art & Language had begun to engage in opposition to the status quo within the art world, seeking to unmask the power and authority of publications such as *Artforum* and institutions such as MoMA. It did this through what Robert Bailey describes as 'an intensely intellectualized and deliberately contrarian collaboration involving its two namesakes'.<sup>202</sup> *The Fox* was a forking path in this existing sub-institutional name play, it both dispersed this activity and concentrated or intensified it. One way of defining a game by which one sought to 'not just embody a commodity mode of existence' entailed ludic refusal to conform to a pre-established corporate identity, thus the contrary and shifting but crucial differences developed between *Art-Language* and Art & Language, which were then spun out through *The Fox*.<sup>203</sup> The journals seized and supplanted the authority of art critics and theorists by taking up writing and publishing as an activity carried out by artists. This took the form of the exploration of the essay form within *The Fox*, whereas *Art-Language* tended to develop other more idiosyncratic formats.<sup>204</sup> Through these three hybrid organisations A&L instituted communities through their varying and new configuration of the production relations of artist, writer, editor, reader. This did not mean they somehow exited

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200 Isaiah Berlin glossing Archilochus in Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, p.2 quoted in Ibid., p.110.

201 *The Fox*, Vol.1 No.1, 1975, p.iii (n.p.).

202 Bailey, op. cit., p.1.

203 Art & Language, 'Introduction,' p.10. quoted Ibid., p.4.

204 Ibid., p.111.

the commodification labour which is the basis of capitalist society and therefore social relations within it, or the circulation of their own publications as commodities, but it did allow for some control, flexibility and critical engagement with what those relations meant inside self-organised initiatives. Community development is now something that is done to us by the government, the council, our school, the police, but for Art & Language community development meant something else: a certain self-consciousness about how communities are formed and take shape inside the production and circulation of art.<sup>205</sup> From *Art-Language Inventory* inherited conditions in which publishing was explicitly politicised both as a rebuke to the external management of art by art criticism and the market, and a site of social critique (critical sociology) and autonomy from the mainstream media, yet by opening their publication to a stream of external and sometimes anonymous contributors *Inventory* were closest to the centrifugal tendencies of *The Fox*.

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205 'The notion of communities has only recently been researched by sociologists. A view of the history of art based on the changing ambitions due to community ideologies should be revealing. What A&L is doing is making this community space explicit—deliberately social and institutionally based – intersubjective rather than subjective.' Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden, 'Problems of Art & Language Space,' *Art- Language* 2, no. 3 (September 1973): pp.70–71, quoted in *Ibid.*, pp.68-69.

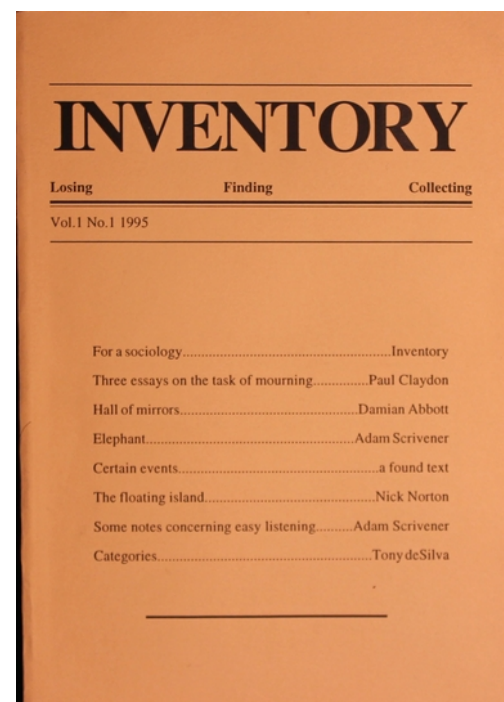
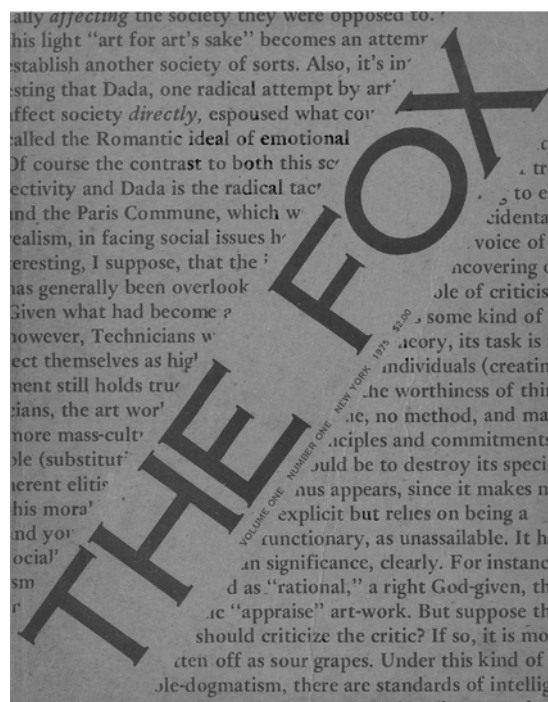


Image: (left) *Art-Language*, Vol.3 No.2, 1976 (centre) *The Fox*, Vol.1 No.1, 1975 (right) *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995.



Images: (above) flyer for Art & Language exhibition at Gallery Poo Poo, Underwood Street, London, Oct–Nov, 1998  
 (below) Installation view Art & Language exhibition at Gallery Poo Poo

## Pre/Postscript: The Profound Purchase

Before concluding, I want to discuss briefly a precursor project to the journal which was formative for *Inventory*. I place this discussion here because the ‘Profound Purchase’ was generated at a moment at which those who would become future editors and contributors of *Inventory* wanted to make a project, to do something collective, but they did not yet know what this project *was yet to be*. This sense of not producing something *ex nihilo* but building it from the ground up without a clear plan nor end result begins with continues after ‘The Profound Purchase’ and continues afterwards to permeate and structure the journal. I feel ‘The Profound Purchase’ it is indicative of the synthesis *Inventory* made of the different orientations of the examples discussed above, but ‘The Profound Purchase’ stands alone, a marker and moment in which the group formed without a past, and not yet with a common future.

The preoccupations of *Inventory*’s first collective text, *The Profound Purchase*, are ‘unwholeness’, consumption, the commodity, knowledge, ‘unknowing’, system. There is an early prefiguration of the radical ungrounding of subjective-objective social synthesis which the method of a fierce sociology would later systematise: ‘it is a process (recognising, seeking, assimilating) centred upon an object rather than the object itself which defines a purchase as PROFOUND.’<sup>206</sup> The text emphasises that the mode of, what we might call after Alfred Sohn-Rethel ‘social synthesis’, is not restricted to western capitalism, but ‘that process is situated within the malaise of cultures, ethnology, societies, civilizations etc. More specifically [...] it is a process prevalent within those areas occupied by capitalism and state capitalism.’<sup>207</sup> There is also a kind of prescription for what would become the ‘task’ of the journal an investigation into ‘products’ – the commodity, but also the subject (labour power) as a commodity, a lifestyle: ‘Is this then our task for the day? To tease apart the products which simulate codes of living and those which enable us to stimulate living codes...’<sup>208</sup> *Inventory* are immediately differentiated here from their teachers by the confidence in the ability of text and its performative presentation to invoke these mediatic objects. Where a previous generation were drawn to photography as a mass and artistic medium in which criticality had to be carefully constructed in order to wrest the medium from the magnetism of commercial circulation, *Inventory*’s attraction to text suggested a step back from art works towards theory, or the

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206 Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Tony DeSilva, Morisa and Adam Scrivener, *The Profound Purchase*, p.3. Digitised unpublished typewritten manuscript collection of Nick Norton.

207 Ibid., p.1 (n.p.)

208 Ibid.



production of cultural *texts*, since the post-structuralist understanding of all cultural productions was as cultural *texts*. Like *Art & Language*, *Inventory* implies the self-sufficiency of linguistic propositions to encompass art and go beyond it. *The Profound Purchase* suggests both the self-sufficiency and insufficiency of text, it constantly implies processes and movements, even in its invocation of repetition and feedback: ‘the process restarts’.<sup>209</sup>

## Conclusions

Four important conditions are hereby established for *Inventory*. Firstly, the artists by whom they were taught (Patrick Keiller and Neil Cummings) had thoroughly absorbed the new framework for writerly artists established by conceptual art and the avant-garde: the artist could theorise; the artist could produce criticism to defend the boundaries of their practice and those of their peers and the artist could use text, or writing, in their work. Secondly, after conceptual art there was a movement by many politically committed artists to explore forms of ‘publication’ to intervene in both mass media and other communication networks. Thirdly, the impetus towards independence provided for by the defence of ‘self-expression’ in the art school passed onto publishing as a strategy for interdisciplinary research denied in the UK university system. Fourthly, within the mix orientating various tendencies towards the ‘writerly’ was the exploration of theoretical research outside of the art historical canon, this included philosophy, semiotics, sociology and anthropology.

*Inventory* is a collective enterprise set up by a group of writers, artists, and theorists looking to explore alternatives to the limitations imposed on these disciplines. It operates on a number of fronts: as an experimental journal, in the presentation of material in diverse formats and as an ongoing process whose form we can only guess at.<sup>210</sup>

The group’s emphasis on limits, suggests both a collective effort to exceed disciplinary boundaries and the an attempt to make an ensemble, or produce a total work, whose form would not be predetermined either by art or another disciplinary framework. Nonetheless, as I hinted in the introduction, this conception itself is close to the romantic conception of the art work, a project to ‘[t]o make things of which we do not know what they are.’<sup>211</sup> This, however has a double valence in

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>210</sup> *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

<sup>211</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), London; New York: Continuum Press, 1997, p.114.

*Inventory*'s work, for the journal, or the investigations it acted as a vehicle for intended to steel itself against capitalist use values, and moreover since the journal itself was conceived in fragmentary terms – 'to make homogeneity seem impossible' – and not as a 'product', the true product might be deemed the fleeting community generated through the process of making and reading *Inventory*.<sup>212</sup>

The family resemblance of *October* and *Inventory*'s covers, particularly the inclusion of contents on the front page and the single colour (often red) highlight on an otherwise black and white cover, comes to take on more complex resonances if we consider that *October* drew closely upon *Tel Quel*, itself the outcome of a French intellectual tradition of journal publishing rooted in 1920s and 1930s surrealism. This is a tradition which *Inventory* were self-consciously explicit about recovering and they did so through the lens provided for by *October*, but also as autodidacts and 'intellectual partisan[s]' very much attune to the critical approaches to research, theory and media personified by their British intellectual forbears in and outside of the art school milieux I have sketched in my introduction. *Inventory*'s encounter with surrealism gave a distinctive twist to the way they navigated the intellectual and artistic currents and social phenomena of their time. Through it the self-obsessed and parodic approaches to community generated by *Art-Language* were deepened and turned outwards, pursuing the centrifugal tendency of *The Fox* but in a more sustained form with the journal operating as the 'central research spine' for *Inventory*'s editors' and others' activities over an extended period.<sup>213</sup> This established the confidence for artist-writers not only to write on subjects of their choosing, but to also appropriate disciplinary apparatuses for their own ends. Through it experimentation with textual and publishing form is not restrictively contained by the bureaucratic tendencies of conceptual art but gains a commitment to exploration of the existence of communifying moments at the margins of human experience.<sup>214</sup>

Surrealism's joint interest in psychoanalysis, sociology and ethnography are understood as tools viable for reappropriation to the ends of these commitments. The retrieval of political currents of the surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s and central to it the political interpretation of surrealism by Walter Benjamin empowered a movement turning inside-out and away from *Art-Language*'s critical concentration towards art and instead turned to the study of social phenomena and one of its central animating mysteries, the commodity. Though *Inventory* like *Art & Language* retained a critical eye towards sociology, surrealism and sociology, in

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212 *Indent*, op. cit., p.34.

213 Adam Scrivener, 'Curriculum Vitae', <http://www.wildcapital.net/> [accessed 5/02/18].

214 On bureaucratic tendencies within conceptual art cf. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, No.55 (Winter 1990), pp.105-143.

methodical terms and in the complex and original constellation in which *Inventory* remade them are then the focus of my next chapter. Across these first three chapters I have, firstly, looked at *Inventory* formally (Chapter 1), then in terms of extraneous models which provided examples of formal exemplars, thematic content and modes of organisation which *Inventory* followed or developed (Chapter 2). Subsequently, in Chapters 3 and 4, I will attempt to isolate something like *Inventory*'s method and this is developed out of debates they staged in the journal by drawing on methodological debates which have a relation to the publishing models developed here.

# **Chapter 3**

## **Georges Bataille, Ethnography, Surrealism and Fierce Sociology**

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# Introduction

## A Benjaminian or Bataillean Method?

The focus of this and the following chapter examines *Inventory*'s relationship to two major figures in 20th century cultural criticism and philosophy: Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille. As indicated in Chapter 1, Benjamin provides the primary source for the *Inventory*'s name and journal title through a phrase drawn from his 'Moscow Diary'. This phrase 'The inventory of the streets is inexhaustible', is the quotation *Inventory*'s editorial group used as the epigram to their first editorial for the journal and this remained displayed prominently in the only official online archive of their work.<sup>1</sup> While the naming of the journal is to be considered of great significance, this initial editorial equally draws on the opening statements of the formation of the College of Sociology, a para-academic meeting and discussion group initiated by Georges Bataille, which Walter Benjamin himself briefly attended between 1938–39.<sup>2</sup> I argue then in this and the following chapters that the specific genesis of *Inventory* journal was brought about through the fusion of interests and themes of the work of Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille, imagined as if at the moment of this encounter between them (the late-1930s), in an atmosphere of pre-war crisis, rising fascism and deeply politicised sociological ambitions.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin provides the philosophical problem of experience, Bataille and his milieu orientate the practical solution (the journal), the epistemological framework (sociological study), and, conjoined, the pair register a common political framework (anti-fascism, communism, sovereignty) amidst a shared frame of cultural reference (surrealism, romanticism and critical sociology and philosophy).

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- 1 *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5. 'four texts (by Caillois, Bataille, and Leiris) constituting 'For a College of Sociology' were the lead articles in the *Nouvelle Revue française* for July 1938.' in Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.7.
  - 2 Benjamin 'assiduously attended the College of Sociology' and was scheduled to present his own work in a series of lectures to the College on fashion in Baudelaire, just before his internment in 1939. Aside from *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, op. cit., pp.388–389, the key account of Benjamin and Bataille's mutual interest is Michael Weingrad, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research', *New German Critique*, no. 84, 2001, pp.129–61.
  - 3 See Chris Shilling and Philip A. Mellor, *The Sociological Ambition: Elementary Forms of Social and Moral Life*, London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001. One of the key works of this period which indicates an attempt to read the crisis in both cultural and economic terms through the direct experience of those who were subject to its ravages, 'not wretched people, but conditions that make people wretched', is Siegfried Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses*. In 1931 Walter Benjamin's reviewed this classic work of 'crisis literature', part labour sociology, part cultural reflection on the years immediately following the great crash and leading up to the National Socialists seizure of power in Germany, Walter Benjamin, 'An Outsider Attracts Attention' – On The Salaried Masses by S. Kracauer' in Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*. London; New York: Verso, 1998, pp.109–114.



Benjamin and Bataille's influences over the group are furthermore evidenced thematically and philologically within the journal. Themes close to Benjamin's heart: utopias; utopian architecture; arcades; commodities; refuse; the outmoded; fragments; childrens' toys; myths and ruins abound, in pictorial and textual form, throughout the complete run of the journal. Benjamin is frequently quoted, cited and alluded to in the journal. His work was clearly inspirational not only to its founders and editors but also to a very wide range of journal contributors, including their former tutor at Chelsea College, Neil Cummings<sup>4</sup>, notable Benjamin scholars (Esther Leslie) and scholars and translators of surrealism and Bataille (Michael Richardson, Krzysztof Fijalkowski, John Cussans). If only on this superficial level, a lengthy exploration of *Inventory*'s relationship to the writings of Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille would be justified. However, I shall go further in this and a subsequent chapter by attempting to establish the grounds for an original interpretation of Benjamin's method and the methodologies engaged with by Bataille within *Inventory* journal. Not only did *Inventory* emulate Benjamin and Bataille at the level of style, but they emulated the form of their research and its presentation – specifically by developing formats for experimentation with the *feuilleton*, or short essay, in dynamic combination with lexicological fragments, in the form of glosses collected in a cumulative glossary. The significant forerunner of this approach is the 'Critical Dictionary' developed by Georges Bataille in the journal *Documents* (1929–1930).<sup>5</sup> The critical or philosophical dictionary, fragment, glossary and essay are, however, also forms to which Benjamin and Adorno ascribed a methodological, aesthetic and philosophical significance.<sup>6</sup>

The 'fiercely sociological' approach of *Inventory* shall be shown to orientate itself via strongly Bataillean themes: sovereignty, games, tragedy, mourning, myth, mimesis, violence, the sacred. At the level of form, Bataille's writing is also strongly influential. Short and long form contributions to

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4 'Given my interests in material culture, in museums and collecting I'd been introducing Georges Bataille and Walter Benjamin into undergraduate lectures. On the MA, I remember Susan Buck Morse's book *The Dialectics of Seeing* being very influential - for thinking about fragments, collecting, ruins, retail culture and capital, and my interest in Bataille was via Mauss, anthropology and surrealism - James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* - so using *The Accursed Share*, ideas of general and restrictive economies, of the *informe* as a disruptive process or thing. Chelsea Library has a complete set of Bataille's *Documents*. Baudrillard too, the *Baudrillard of Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993) with his analysis and critique of a political economy.' Neil Cummings interviewed by the author, 1 June 2018, transcript included in appendix.

5 In Adorno and Benjamin's correspondence a passing comment suggests that Benjamin, in previous drafts of his 'Baudelaire Studies', may have even been following Bataille in arranging his text according to categories ('dust' being one of the most famous entries in *Documents* 'Critical Dictionary' section), single words describing the materials evocative of the society in discussion: 'Were there not once sections according to materials, like "plush", "dust", etc.? The relationship between Fourier and the arcades is not very satisfactory either. Here I could imagine as a suitable pattern a constellation of the various urban and commodity materials, an arrangement later to be deciphered as both dialectical image and its theory.' Theodor W. Adorno, 'Adorno to Benjamin Hornberg, Black Forest, 2 August 1935', Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, György Lukács, Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson, London: Verso, 2007, p.115.

6 Here I am substantially indebted to the discussion explored in Stewart Martin, 'Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy' Phd, Middlesex University, 2002. <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/6707/> pp.155-161.

*Inventory* journal frequently explore techniques of alarming ontological subversion found in Bataille's work of the 1930s and as I have argued in the preceding chapters this emulation extends to innovative elements of the journal as a form developed in Bataille's publishing projects as an editor and organiser as well as a writer. Nonetheless *Inventory* by no means prioritised only Bataille's approach. Bataille's colleague in the College of Sociology Roger Callois' work, particularly his concept of 'diagonal science' as 'diagonal classification', is also cited with regard to *Inventory*'s method and is frequently engaged as a source bearing upon methodological questions in other essays published in the journal.<sup>7</sup>

In their first editorial *Inventory* wrote that 'the urgency of a correct classification of things has meant that *Inventory* had to come about.'<sup>8</sup> Command over systems of classification, over the very social construction of the meaning of words was for *Inventory* a way of developing sovereignty and critical purchase on the social field. In parallel to the influence of both Bataille and Benjamin's writing in terms of mutual interest in classification systems and their disruption, the editorial group directing *Inventory* sought self-consciously to encourage the development of 'the essay as form' in the journal.<sup>9</sup> This concept, originally developed by Theodor W. Adorno in his famous essay (1954–1958) describes the essay, as a form that falls between the sciences and humanities, in which, 'thought's utopian vision of hitting the bullseye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character', and of which he proposed Benjamin as an exemplar.<sup>10</sup> In these three thinkers writings a crucial sociological element licenses the ambitious study of human society meets and this in turn finds integration with the critical and historical reconstruction of aesthetic experience. *Inventory*'s project thereby incorporated not only Benjamin's theoretical system, but aspects drawn from the work of his close friend, ally and correspondent Theodor W. Adorno in two significant ways: through discussion of the essay as a form and through a significant debate on their

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7 *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: a Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', op. cit., p.151. In Adam Scrivener's study of the National Lottery he draws extensively on Callois' typologies and classifications of games and his efforts to develop a form of sociology derived from games, Adam Scrivener, 'The Mystique of Numbers', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.42-54; In the essay 'Orpheus Street' and visual essay 'Urban Odyssey', recalling Callois' 'The Mask of the Medusa', *Inventory* explore the mythic resonances of London street names, 'Orpheus Street', 'Hercules Road' and so on, opening them up to 'diagonal classification'; *Inventory*, 'Orpheus Street', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.4-7 and *Inventory* & Gauthier Deblonde, 'Urban Odyssey', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2, 1996, pp.66-67; Michael Richardson's essay on 'Paris in its Myths' alludes to a lecture Callois gave at the College with a very similar title, See FN#84.

8 *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', Vol.1 No.1, 1995, p.4.

9 *Inventory* reference this text, firstly (without citation) in the 'Notes to Contributors' included in the first issue, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995 (inside back cover) and every subsequent issue of the journal, and, secondly (with citation) via a sustained discussion on what the essay as a form meant within their practice, in their final editorial, *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.6.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature Vol.1*, Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. (Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson), New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, pp.3-23, p.16.

common endeavour to renew methods of materialist research. The subsequent Chapter 4 therefore reconstructs an important methodological discussion between Theodor. W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin through its revisitation in the journal.<sup>11</sup> This chapter (Chapter 3) establishes the central debate around ethnographic surrealism and *Inventory*'s 'method of a fierce sociology'. As a central component in the following chapter (Chapter 4) I seek to illuminate the stakes of the debate between Adorno and Benjamin for *Inventory*'s editorial group and how it transformed the journal's purported sociological method and impacted on the journal's practice.

Benjamin's method, as we shall see, was informed by 'speculative' and historical experience. In a general conceptual sense we can consider *Inventory*'s mode of writing and publishing vehicle a synthesis of Benjamin's ambition 'to read what was never written' and Georges Bataille's aspiration towards the *impossible*, the visceral attraction of the unknown and the subversion of existing systems of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Pursuing superficial formal attribution, one could consider the two distinct sections of the journal an attempt to create a synthesis and dynamic tension between Benjamin and Bataille's approaches. *Inventory*'s Glossary section can be shown to be directly modelled on the critical dictionary developed in *Documents*, and *Inventory*'s short essays modelled on Benjamin's *feuilletons*. However, these positions are arguably interchangeable: Bataille was likewise a master of the essay form and contributed extensively to all manner of publications; Benjamin also published anonymously, was also fascinated by philological and lexicological issues, and organised several of his major works around 'keywords' and aphoristic formats.<sup>13</sup> He described *One Way*

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11 The debate is examined in detail in an essay by *Inventory* editor, Paul Claydon, "'Botanizing on the Asphalt": Walter Benjamin and the City' (1996); cited in an important methodological statement by the editorial group, 'Do You Feel Crushed?' (1998); and much later discussed again extensively in their recent work, *The Counsel of Spent* (2018). *Inventory*, 'Do You Feel Crushed?', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8; Paul Claydon, "'Botanizing on the Asphalt": Walter Benjamin and the City', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.36-65 and *Inventory*, *The Counsel of Spent*, London: Book Works, 2018, specifically pp.55-57.

12 'to read what was never written' is a quote by German poet Hugo von Hoffmanstall to which Benjamin repeatedly referred in his writings, perhaps most pointedly in the final paragraph of 'On the Mimetic Faculty'. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, Eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings and Gary Smith, (Trans. Rodney Livingstone), Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2005, pp.720-722. The concept of the 'impossible' is distributed across Bataille's writings, forming the enigmatic title of the last book published in his lifetime. Here I wish to make the connection specifically to Bataille's method of writing and its form of presentation. 'In a sense the unlimited assemblage is the impossible.' Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*. New York: Zone Books, 1989, p.9. Stuart Kendall summarises the significance of the concept in terms of Bataille's writing practice thus: 'Bataille did not write for recognition, far from it: He wrote to disrupt the assumptions and processes that might make recognition possible. He wrote to ruin words, to reveal the ultimate impossibility of complete communication and to open a sphere wherein the impossible – the heterogeneous, the different, the sacred – could be communicated.' Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille*. London: Reaktion, 2007, p.8. For further discussion of this concept in Bataille's work see: Denis Hollier, 'The Use Value of the Impossible', in Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Michel Leiris, 'From the Impossible Bataille to the Impossible Documents', in Michel Leiris, *Brisées: Broken Branches* San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989.

13 E.g. *One-Way Street*, and the unfinished *Passagearbeit*. This format finds other notable adherents within the Frankfurt School, both preceding Benjamin (Max Horkheimer), and following him (Adorno's late works). It is a

*Street* as a ‘booklet for friends’ of ‘my aphorisms, jokes, dreams’.<sup>14</sup> Bataille’s oeuvre consists of many texts unpublished during his lifetime often written for small circulation among informal groupings of friends and political allies.<sup>15</sup> Both figures experimented with innovative publishing formats, arrangements of text and image, short lexicological texts or glosses, and pseudonymous or collectively authored texts.<sup>16</sup> Like Bataille, Benjamin’s thought was closely, but not uncritically, allied to surrealism. Their relation to institutional philosophy was equally problematic, Benjamin’s thought, according to Adorno, remained a form of ‘philosophy directed against philosophy’.<sup>17</sup> The multiple points of engagement (as philosophers, publishers, essayists, political thinkers) with these figures in *Inventory* substantially transforms any simplistic translation of them as sources for the journal. Remembering, in Chapter 1 I articulated the separate elements of the journal as a system of moving parts enacting a coarticulation of elements within the whole, thinking this relation through Benjamin and Bataille we encounter various efforts to develop a unity of thought and object through formally innovative, and even performative, aspects of the presentation of their work.

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format I discuss at in Chapters 1, 4 and 5 of this study.

- 14 ‘The new project, a “booklet for friends” of “my aphorisms, jokes, dreams,” was written in short sections, many of which were published separately as fragments in daily newspapers. They appeared together in 1928 as *Einbahnstrasse* (*One Way Street*), and included as possibly its earliest component the revised, politicized version of the 1923 fragment “Imperial Panorama: A Tour of German Inflation.”’ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, p.16.
- 15 A key example being Bataille’s ‘Letter to My Current Comrades’, Georges Bataille, ‘The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)’, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, (Trans. Allan Stoekl), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp.91-102
- 16 Some pseudonyms Benjamin used during his lifetime were: Ardour; Detlef Holz; O.E. Tal; K.A. Stempflinger and C. Conrad, see Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008, p.23, p.139, 140, p.146. On Benjamin’s aphoristic and gloss-like writings see: Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, (Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter), London: New Left Books, 1979 and *Passagen-Werk or Arcades Project*. ‘[Gershom] Scholem argues that Benjamin’s love for the miniature underlies his taste for brief literary utterances, evident in *One-Way Street*. Perhaps; but books of this sort were common in the 1920s, and it was in a specifically Surrealist montage style that these short independent texts were presented. *One-Way Street* was published by Ernst Rowohlt in Berlin, in booklet form with typography intended to evoke advertising shock effects; the cover was a photographic montage of aggressive phrases in capital letters from newspaper announcements, ads, official and odd signs. The opening passage, in which Benjamin hails ‘prompt language’ and denounces “the pretentious, universal gesture of the book”, does not make much sense unless one knows what kind of book, physically, *One-Way Street* was designed to be.’ Gershom Scholem, quoted in Susan Sontag, ‘Introduction’ in *One-Way Street*, op. cit., #FN10, pp.20–21 The practice of producing satirical dictionaries and encyclopedias has a much broader trajectory stretching from the enlightenment through the critical theory tradition, surrealism, the inter-war European avant-garde and post-war ultra-left, the reverberations between these and *Inventory*’s glossary are discussed in Chapter 5 on *The Journal as Form*.
- 17 ‘A Portrait of Walter Benjamin’, in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, (Trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber), London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p.235. The specifically philosophical Benjamin was rather a late emergence in critical reception of his work. Two comprehensive presentations of this view are Benjamin, Andrew E, and Peter Osborne, (eds.) *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, London; New York: Routledge, 1994 and Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin the Colour of Experience*. London; New York: Routledge, 1998. From another perspective Stewart Martin investigates the problem of philosophy in Adorno’s through an extensive account of the relationship of Benjamin and Adorno and the way their different approaches to philosophy shaped each other. ‘Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy’, op. cit.

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		<b>t</b>	.....
		<b>u</b>	.....
		<b>v</b>	.....
		<b>w</b>	.....

Image: Walter Benjamin's Index to the Arcades project, Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (2002) p.29



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# LA NOUVELLE REVUE FRANÇAISE

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## POUR UN COLLÈGE DE SOCIOLOGIE

### Introduction

Il semble que les circonstances actuelles se prêtent très particulièrement à un *travail critique* ayant pour objet les rapports mutuels de l'être de l'homme et de l'être de la société : ce qu'il attend d'elle, ce qu'elle exige de lui.

Ces vingt dernières années auront vu en effet un des plus considérables *tumultes* intellectuels qu'on puisse imaginer. Rien de durable, rien de solide, *rien qui fonde* : déjà tout s'effrite et perd ses arêtes, et le temps n'a fait encore qu'un seul pas. Mais une extraordinaire et presque inconcevable *fermentation* : les problèmes de la veille remis chaque jour en question et quantité d'autres, neufs, extrêmes, déroutants, inlassablement inventés par des esprits prodigieusement actifs et non moins prodigieusement incapables de patience et de continuité. En un mot, une production submergeant réellement le marché, et sans mesure avec les besoins et la capacité même de consommation.

De fait, beaucoup de richesses, beaucoup d'espaces vierges brusquement ouverts à l'exploration, quelquefois à l'exploitation : le rêve, l'inconscient, toutes les formes du merveilleux et de l'excès (l'un définissant l'autre). Un individualisme forcené, qui faisait du *scandale* une valeur, donnait à l'ensemble une sorte d'unité affective et quasi lyrique. C'était, à vrai dire, dépasser le but : en tout cas beaucoup donner à la société, que tant se plaire à la provoquer. Peut-être doit-on voir là le germe d'une contradiction dont l'ampleur croissante devait finir par dominer sur un certain registre la vie intellectuelle de l'époque : les écrivains s'essayant avec maladresse ou superbe à participer aux luttes politiques et voyant leurs préoccupations intimes si mal s'accorder aux exigences de leur cause qu'ils devaient rapidement se soumettre ou se démettre.

De ces deux déterminations opposées, recherche des phénomènes

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Image: Roger Caillois, 'Pour un College de Sociologie: Introduction' *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, July, 1938, p.5



## FOR A SOCIOLOGY...

*"the inventory of the streets is inexhaustable"*  
Walter Benjamin

Although we are not new we are fiercely sociological. Our material has been collected from the four corners of the floating city, and no object, text, picture has been held in higher esteem than the other. Inventory is like a net, cast it into the sea and you are sure to catch some kind of fish; anthropology, fine arts, history, genealogy, (sexual) politics, eroticism, fashions, popular culture! militia, laughter and erring.

The urgency of a correct classification of things has meant that Inventory had to come about. An expedient measure, which upon its dissemination shall prove to its readers things that we, the authors, cannot even guess at. New constellations, subjects, themes at once contradictory and apposite, coming into direct collision with one another, flattering themselves, entering into secret discourses, leaving residues and traces never before detected - NEVER BEFORE SOUGHT. Inventory is a means of writing, recording, reclassifying and cataloguing the social material life that exists around us. This is our goal, to take measures that bring about a cataract where hierarchical distinctions between things, between their values, becomes impossible, indeed, POINTLESS. We choose to dispense with traditional epistemological thinking by playing with category and convention, a space flexible enough for an endless interplay of differences, coincidences and connections, NOT HOMO SAPIENS BUT HOMO LUDENS! We are at the disposal of the eclectic and the specialist alike. But better, much better, the schizophrenic who, through his ever changing speciality betrays an eclecticism unknown even to himself, revealing hidden agendas of unquantifiable depth or shallowness, of indeterminable duration, knowing only that the hierarchy of knowledges, facts, statistics ...

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4

For a sociology ...

truths should be resisted and that all objects, all things can be rendered to analysis beneath the passionately objective gaze of this, our fierce sociology.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theology?

Inventory



5

Image: Inventory, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1 1995

# The Method of a Fierce Sociology

## Initial Formulation of *Inventory*'s Fierce Sociology

In their first editorial 'For a Sociology' *Inventory* invoke the first public announcement of the College of Sociology's project, an introduction and essays by Caillois, Bataille and Jules Monnerot published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* July 1938, grouped together under the title 'For a College of Sociology'.<sup>18</sup> In this short text *Inventory*'s editorial group lay out their intention to develop a method they described as a 'fierce sociology'. 'For a Sociology' already stood in a prominent position in the cabinet display at SOAS (1994) and later was one of only four texts on the journal's first web page (date unknown).<sup>19</sup> The first line of this text reads: 'Although we are not new we are fiercely sociological.' The last lines of the text close:

We are at the disposal of the eclectic and the specialist alike. But better, much better, the schizophrenic who, through his ever changing speciality betrays an eclecticism unknown even to himself, revealing hidden agendas of unquantifiable depth or shallowness, of indeterminable duration, knowing only that the hierarchy of knowledges, facts, statistics ... truths should be resisted and that all objects, all things can be rendered to analysis beneath the passionately objective gaze of this, our fierce sociology.<sup>20</sup>

In earlier drafts for the journal's cover and their first press release this phrase is drafted as 'surrealist sociology'.<sup>21</sup> This came to be transformed into a 'fierce sociology', through appropriations from, Bataille's text: 'The Sacred Conspiracy'.<sup>22</sup> This text served as an initial programme for the group *Acephale* and was published in the first issue of the journal *Acéphale*.<sup>23</sup> The precise section from

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18 *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5 and *The College of Sociology*, op. cit., pp.7-42.

19 <http://bak.spc.org/inventory/> [Accessed 4 November, 2018]

20 *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5.

21 Various draft press material, undated, unpaginated. *Inventory* archive, Chelsea College of Art & Design Archive.

22 Georges Bataille, 'The Sacred Conspiracy' in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., pp.178-181. 'Conspiration sacrée' makes mocking reference to the 'union sacrée', formulated by the Prime Minister Rene Viviani and the President of the French Republic, Raymond Poincaré on the eve of World War I, a political truce between the left and the government to suspend strikes and demonstrations for the sake of the defense of the nation, which Bataille draws into analogy with the Popular Front's efforts to maintain social peace.

23 'The Sacred Conspiracy', *Acephale*, No.1, June 1936, pp.1-4. Reproduced in Georges Bataille (Ed.), *Acephale ; Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie: 1936-1939*, Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1995.

which the adjective ‘fierce’ is drawn is part of a series of paragraphs printed in bold type, and the precise phrase ‘WE ARE FIERCELY RELIGIOUS’ is specifically capitalised.<sup>24</sup>

When *Inventory*’s text was written the only available English version of this text, in *Visions of Excess*, translated the French term, the adverb ‘*farouchement*’, not as ‘fiercely’, but as ‘ferociously’.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, the phrasing ‘we are fiercely sociological’ reflects a correction to the translation of Bataille’s text.<sup>26</sup> Other editorial texts in the journal often borrow from Bataille’s tendency to use upper case text for emphasis.<sup>27</sup> It is my contention that *Inventory*’s editors made use of the surrealist technique of collage (applied to both textual and conceptual apparatuses) to *invent* a compound phrase drawing on the programmatic statements of both projects (The College of Sociology and Acephale/*Acéphale*), to suture together a project which would unite the sum of past efforts – what was ‘not new’, or not original – with present concerns.<sup>28</sup>

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24 Reproduced from Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol.I, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, p.443. In English translation:

WE ARE FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS and, to the extent that our existence is the condemnation of everything that is recognized today, an inner exigency demands that we be equally imperious.

[the text continues...]

What we are starting is a war.

It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to be reasonable and educated – which has led to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become completely different, or to cease being.

25 Georges Bataille, ‘The Sacred Conspiracy’, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, (Trans. and Ed. Allan Stoekl), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp.178-181. French-English dictionaries translate the term, without ambiguity, as ‘fiercely’. Catherine E. Love (Ed.), *Larousse Dictionnaire Compact: Français-Anglais/Anglais-Français*, Paris: Larousse, 1999. The validity of this translation, is confirmed by the recent publication of a controversial text responding to the November 2015 Paris attacks, written by former members of the journal and group *Tiqqun*, and The Invisible Committee, ‘La Guerre Véritable’ (The Real War) published on the website *Lundi Matin*, ‘La guerre véritable: Un second éditorial’, November 2015, <https://lundi.am/La-guerre-veritable>, translated into English, *Lundi Matin*, ‘The Real War: a Second Editorial’, November 2015, <http://anarchistnews.org/content/real-war> [accessed 1/4/2016] This text’s ill-informed celebration of terrorism is itself of significance for contemporary political and cultural currents drawing on the legacy of Bataille’s milieus.

26 There are further similarities between the two texts, such as the assumption of a first person plural, the occurrence of capitalised phrases in the text: ‘NEVER BEFORE SOUGHT’; ‘POINTLESS’; ‘NOT HOMO SAPIENS BUT HOMO LUDENS!’ and the generally emphatic sloganeering tone. We must assume then, either *Inventory* members had access to an alternative translation, or retranslated the term directly themselves.

27 A second key example would be *Inventory*, ‘I Want More Life Fucker’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.4–7.

28 ‘it wasn’t that original perhaps [laughter] that we invented collective practice.’ Appendices: Interview with Adam Scrivener. Bataille’s text ‘The Pineal Eye’ is cited in the fullest and most concentrated elucidation of the method of ‘a fierce sociology’, *Inventory*, ‘Fierce Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8.

**NOUS SOMMES FAROUCHEMENT RELIGIEUX et, dans la mesure où notre existence est la condamnation de tout ce qui est reconnu aujourd'hui, une exigence intérieure veut que nous soyons également impérieux.**

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*"philosophy has been, up to this point, as much as science, an expression of human subordination, and when man seeks to represent himself, no longer as a moment of a homogeneous process - of a necessary and pitiful process - but as a new laceration within a lacerated nature, it is no longer the levelling phraseology coming to him from the understanding that can help him: he can no longer recognise himself in the degrading chains of logic, but he recognises himself, instead - not only with rage but in an ecstatic torment - in the virulence of his own phantasms."*<sup>2</sup>

In calling for a virulent, mythological representation of the multiple subjectivities that science (rational thought) has excluded, one still has a residue of respect for the need to deal rigorously with objective facts. As Bataille perceived it, science had, in proceeding from a mythological conception of the universe, split this universe into two distinct parts; it had assimilated and developed humankind's thirst and capacity for mental enquiry into an "activity useful for man's material life". At the same moment, in destroying the "delirious religious constructions" of societies it in fact liberated them from necessity and thus it "casts off its heavy mantle of mystical servitude", and it is only then that, "nude and lubricious, it plays with the universe and its laws as if they were toys". Leaving religion then, to slowly assimilate itself with science (to a certain degree) and, more importantly, the beginnings of capitalism. But this is not to suggest that we are nostalgic for any archaic construction of society nor do we have any desire for a utopian futurism. In an affirmative manner, it is merely to state that we see sociality as a continual movement, a continuous "fabrication of new assemblages of enunciation, individual and collective."<sup>3</sup> Archaic societal patterns can be seen as possessing a mechanical character, multiple machines if you will, manifesting a myriad of complex relationships (rituals, symbols, strata, and so on) which survive into the present by constantly reforming themselves. Human history and present social relationships have always consisted of an infinite web of varying combinations of data (allegiances, beliefs etc). In other words, varying assemblages of the mechanical and the organic. So that, within the quotidian we find sacred phenomena being summoned, re-enacted, in differing macro or micro societal patterns. Moreover, the everyday contains a mix of homogeneity, of productive forces, from which all useless elements are excluded, and heterogeneity, which breaks these limits introducing elements which cannot be wholly re-appropriated. In this sense "the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled".

6



Images: (above) Georges Bataille, 'The Sacred Conspiracy' (1936) in, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol.I, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, p.443. (below) Inventory, 'Fierce Sociology' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.6-7

## Passionate Objectivity

For *Inventory* 'Fierce Sociology' was to signify a form of investigation by subjects situated inside their field of research rather than neutral to, or outside of, it. 'The gleeful paradox of our sociological activism is that we would affirm a permanent interaction; rather than the closed, distanced observer (critic), our agent is positively bound up in, possessed by, the sociality that surrounds them.'<sup>29</sup> Both passionate and objective – 'passionately objective'; 'bewitched objectivity'; 'gleeful paradox' – are formulations deliberately designed to destabilise the polarities of their constituent words – objectivity being, in Enlightenment thought, opposed to passion or other emotions. The group spoke of developing a form of 'contaminated analysis' whereby the onlooker would be transformed by the thing observed and the suggestion is that this opened a reader to similarly transformed and transformative readings. The approach 'For a Sociology' sketched was therefore willingly contradictory and eclectic, open to 'play' with conventions and dispensing with 'traditional epistemological thinking'. The method was revisited in a self-critical mode in 'Fierce Sociology' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997: 'After two years of existence we are no nearer in our drive toward a fierce sociology'.<sup>30</sup> Here, in an editorial which addresses the method of 'fierce sociology' most consistently and comprehensively, which can be understood alongside the editorial 'Do You Feel Crushed?' to respond to Robin Mackay's immanent critique of the group in Vol.1 No.2, the method is described, through references to texts Bataille wrote either side of his adventures with the College of Sociology, "as a new laceration within a lacerated nature" a convulsive communication, a way of staring things in the face, being shaped by phenomena and responding actively to it.<sup>31</sup> The editorial goes the furthest in establishing *Inventory*'s relation to 'science'. Using Bataille's text, it supports his claim that 'philosophy has been, up to this point, as much as science, an expression of human subordination'<sup>32</sup>, establishing as one of the journal's primary objects 'the multiple subjectivities that science (rational thought) has excluded'.<sup>33</sup> Science stands, here, for 'rigid dogmatism', the 'objectification of the world' which excludes human experience.<sup>34</sup> For Bataille,

29 *Inventory*, 'Fierce Sociology' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8, p.5.

30 *Ibid.*, p.5.

31 'Fierce Sociology' *op. cit.*, p.8 quoting Georges Bataille, 'Pineal Eye', in *Visions of Excess*, *op. cit.*, p.80.

32 'philosophy has been, up to this point, as much as science, an expression of human subordination, and when man seeks to represent himself, no longer as a moment of a homogeneous process – of a necessary and pitiful process – but as a new laceration within a lacerated nature, it is no longer the levelling phraseology coming to him from the understanding that can help him: he can no longer recognise himself in the degrading chains of logic, but he recognises himself, instead – not only with rage but in an ecstatic torment – in the virulence of his own phantasms.' *Ibid.*, p.6 quoting Georges Bataille, 'Pineal Eye', in *Visions of Excess*, *op. cit.*, p.80.

33 *Ibid.*

34 'The Essay as Form', *op. cit.*, p.5 and p.6.



who both criticised and drew from psychoanalytic and sociological method, '[t]he object of my research cannot be distinguished from the subject at its boiling point.'<sup>35</sup> For *Inventory*, scientific method is by nature exclusionary, but this does not completely nullify its techniques.

Calling for a virulent, mythological representation of the multiple subjectivities that science (rational thought) has excluded, one still has a residue of respect for the need to deal rigorously with objective facts. As Bataille perceived it, science had, in proceeding from a mythological conception of the universe, split this universe into two distinct parts, it had assimilated and developed humankind's thirst and capacity for mental enquiry into a 'activity useful for man's material life' At the same moment, in destroying the "delirious religious constructions" of societies it in fact liberated them from necessity and thus it 'cast off its heavy mantle of mystical servitude'. And it is only then that, 'nude and lubricious, it plays with the universe and its own laws as if they were toys'.<sup>36</sup>

*Inventory's* proposition does not completely eschew 'objective facts', nor do they seek to 'make things strange' for the sake of mystifying them in order to render them aesthetic.<sup>37</sup> Yet throughout *Inventory's* diverse articulations of their method objectivity is troubled, this is because, in other modes of inquiries into knowledge, 'effects of interaction between observer and observed are never developed' and 'there seems no point in attempting to mirror or maintain some idea of a wholly objective study of a given situation, when the fact [is] that one's own subjective gaze is a participating factor in a given state of affairs.'<sup>38</sup> These are not, for *Inventory*, attempts to expound postmodern relativism. Rather, they participate in a critical project which would cease to treat scientific truths as *sacred*, but rather pry into the mythos of their creation, socialisation and resituate human experience and agency at their centre.<sup>39</sup>

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35 Georges Bataille, *Accursed Share*, p.10 quoted in Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, op. cit., p.53.

36 Ibid.

37 'making things strange' is one way of interpreting the Russian concept of *ostranenie*, or technique of estrangement, central to the Russian formalist approach to art and literature, see Carlo Ginzburg, 'Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device'. *Representations*, no. No. 56 (Autumn 1996): 8–28. Though in a literary register 'estrangement' is cited by Steve Beard, 'Anthropoofferjism Manifesto', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.34–44, and I discuss the significance of this concept further in Chapter 5, with respect to estrangement *Inventory* write: '[T]he utilisation of such a fierce sociology is not so as to render something "strange" or 'marvellous'. Nor is it our task to distort or deliberately obscure a given reality as indefinite.' *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-159, p.151.

38 Ibid., p.151.

39 'The project that science's *sacredness* makes taboo is the examination of science in just the ways any other institution or set of social practises can be examined.' Sandra G. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986, p.8.



## THE METHOD OF A FIERCE SOCIOLOGY

*A structure exists only in order to betray itself.  
Structure only exists in order to be betrayed.*

### 1. Language

- a. The search for a distinctive language.
- b. The taxonomic solution undermined by diagonal classification.
- c. The operational solution undermined by chance.

### 2. Logic

- a. The emergence of empirical logic.
- b. The limits of applicability.
- c. The punishing effects of the inverse deductive method.
- d. The uselessness of statistics outside of a fictional or ideological framework.
- e. The pointlessness of a logical framework.
- f. Accounting for results, accounting for anomalies, the seductions of neatness.
- g. Feeling lost within the prison's walls.

### 3. The personal document

- a. Establishment as a reputable source of information.
- b. Possibilities of distortion by the informant.
- c. Distortion introduced by the investigator.
- d. Personal document as the material basis for generalisation.
- e. The necessary relationship between the social sciences and fiction.

### 4. Documents of other kinds

- a. Records.
- b. Reports.
- c. The value of generalisations based on documents.
- d. The value of generalisations based on sociological phenomena (for example, pub conversations).
- e. Case History material.

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### 5. Problems of authentication

- a. Authenticity and meaning. Radical hermeneutic or the oppression by a neo-liberal rationality?
- b. The interpretation of statistics and auto-theorisation.

### 6. Observation

- a. The importance of firsthand observation.

### 7. Principle difficulties in observation

- a. Inadequacies of our sense organs - sight.
- b. Observation and inference outside of the mores of consumer society.
- c. Fear - effects of interaction between observer and observed are never developed.
- d. Subordination of vision and visual phenomena to capitalism.
- e. Participant observation and honesty.
- f. Failure and the value of the Absurd.

### 8. Observational schedules and other means of recording

- a. Social behaviour.
- b. Observing the inanimate.

### 9. Types of interview

- a. The non-directive interview.
- b. The interrogation of the self.
- c. Life histories.
- d. The informal interview.
- e. Eavesdropping.

### 10. The ideal of objectivity?

- a. Latent structure analysis.
- b. Inherent limitations of attitude measurement.
- c. Forecasts.
- d. Prediction.
- e. The incompleteness of unknowing.
- f. The dynamic of attraction and repulsion.

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Image: Inventory, 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology', *Inventory* Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.4-7, pp.4-5

## Immodest Witnesses

There are two interesting vectors deriving from this account of science. Firstly though *Inventory*'s true object of study was not science, but rather society, science is prevalent in *Inventory*'s contents insofar as it represents a dominant system of knowledge and provides a source of contemporary myths. Indeed, in his 'Report Beyond Zero, Nick Norton finds 'science' tainted with a 'suspiciously holy learning: in chasing a Theory of Everything'.<sup>40</sup> This critical positioning of science, but not the methodological consequences or practice, also forms the bedrock of constructionist approaches to the sociology and history of science a project whose achievements leave a strong imprint on contemporary theoretical and philosophical debates. The second significance is somewhat more speculative, and shall be harder to pin firmly to *Inventory*, but in the short section which follows is provided with its initial substance and will emerge again in the consideration of the positionality of *Inventory*'s writing in Chapter 5. This is the conjecture that the position between subject and object or as a passionate witness is a notionally *feminine* position. In *Modest Witness*, Donna Haraway outlines one of 'the founding virtues of what we call modernity' describing the way a particular partitioning of the human sensorium was established through the practice of science.<sup>41</sup> This scientific practice of experiment and observation established the 'modest witness' as the bearer of knowledge, authorising 'science' and the scientific witness to be exclusively characterised as 'modern, European, masculine, scientific' and thus enabling the condition that decision over the technical and 'rational' be separated from women and non-Europeans. The establishment of these conventions was, according to Haraway, established through three constitutive technologies described by Shapin and Schaffer.<sup>42</sup> These technologies established a monopoly of objectivity in the hands of a European male elite who wielded its epistemological power.<sup>43</sup> The culture of scientific

40 Nick Norton, 'Would You Believe it: A Report from Beyond Zero', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.32–42, p.39.

41 'This is the virtue that guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity. His narratives have a magical power – they lose all trace of their history as stories, as products of partisan projects, as contestable representations, or as constructed documents in their potent capacity to define the facts. The narratives become clear mirrors, fully magical mirrors, without once appealing to the transcendental or the magical.' Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Modest Witness at Second Millennium: Female Man Meets Oncomouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, London: Routledge, 1997, p.24.

42 'a material technology embedded in the construction and operation of the air-pump; a literary technology by means of which the phenomena produced by the pump were made known to those who were not direct witnesses; and a social technology that incorporated the conventions experimental philosophers should use in dealing with each other and considering knowledge-claims', Steven Shapin & Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.1985. p.25, quoted in *Modest Witness*, op. cit., p.24.

43 'Naomi Oreskes points out how scientific desiderata like objectivity, when performed by a woman, simply led to her disappearance from the record: an "objective" woman could be made out to be a mere copyist of nature, a technician or instrument or indeed "computer.")', Naomi Oreskes, 'Objectivity or Heroism? On the Invisibility of

experiment separated the technical from the political in such a way as to present scientific knowledge as the mirror of reality. This process effectively made a specific subjectivity, the agent of scientific experiment and its communication, stand for objectivity: 'subjectivity is his objectivity'.<sup>44</sup> It is this partition of human sense perception, as well as its emphasis on systematic integrity over 'outliers', which *Inventory* attempted to restore by appropriation of the means of science – the literary technology of the printed journal – that, in contrast to this uni-directional transmission of facts, would be a reading-writing apparatus and a space of contending analysis, facts, but equally experiences which have social significance and consequences. *Inventory*'s own model of this work was as a 'catalyst', rather than establishing a relationship of perceiver and perceived, they ideally imagined their readership, or audience in the context of art, to be capable of action.<sup>45</sup>

The 'Method of a Fierce Sociology' was invoked again (in Vol.5 No.1 2003), through playful text which appears as list of techniques which form the method but incorporates equally the absurd and the mundane: '14. Note-taking and carding'; '15. b. Statistical tests for internal verification.'; 16. c. Bewitched spot'; '17. The scope of experiment a. without beginning. b. Without end. c. Taboo.'<sup>46</sup> The text was also read live on radio as part of a series of performances and radio broadcasts entitled Endless Sonic Mania (2000-2003). 'Without Intent' (1999) discusses the commencement of Inventory Survey Project a 'ongoing research initiative that will investigate, through a series of empirical and interventionist strategies, a variety of phenomena ranging from everyday practices [...] to specific events and situations' as an 'impractical expression of 'fierce sociology'.<sup>47</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2 this is the closest *Inventory* came to making something like the 'day surveys' carried out by the Mass-Observation group. One of the key performances in which the method was arguably most radically experimented with was Coagulum (2000) an event, I described initially in Chapter 1, which took place in Kingston Shopping Centre and Oxford Street.<sup>48</sup> This might be

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Women in Science', *Osiris*, Vol.2, No.11, January, 1996, pp.87–113 quoted in Natalia Cecire, 'Habemus PM; or, irritation after the EU referendum', *Jacket2*, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/natalia-cecire> [Accessed 17 February, 2019]

44 Ibid., p.24.

45 'All creative acts must ask questions of life, questions that an artwork or an essay cannot possibly answer alone. This task vitally necessitates the interpretive vigour of the viewer/reader who, rather than be passively advised that a work is (to employ stock reviewer phraseology) 'ambiguous' or 'open to multiple readings', must take a dynamic and actively creative role. [...] we do expect and we expect this from all creative acts, is that, positively or negatively, you ACT UPON IT. Action not reaction.' *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.8, in-text quotation, p.5.

46 *Inventory*, 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology', *Inventory* Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.4–7, p.6.

47 *Inventory*, 'Without Intent', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.4-9.

48 'Aggregations that are mobile, multiple, constructed, overlapping, transitory and a-logical nodes of attraction and repulsion. Provoked and guided by affectivities, beliefs, symbols, play and so on so much more complex than mere metaphor (which does little to underpin societal forms). Thus a fierce sociology can have an element of the 'diagnostic' in that it 'investigates the limits and possibilities of how we have come to think about who we are and what we do, of how we act upon ourselves and others, and the present in which we find, and indeed discover

thought of as a highly unstable version of Mass-Observation's tactics, where a group gathered to form a 'dense mass' – a coagulum – to briefly block the shopping centre 'a refusal of our role, of our work, as consumers'.<sup>49</sup> Again this action was reported in the journal and linked explicitly to the method and its themes. As such *Coagulum* broke a central anthropological and sociological taboo<sup>50</sup>, that of intervening and acting upon the object of sociological analysis, 'For a fierce sociology is not only concerned with the observation of social phenomena – it also wishes to act upon it, to break open a force, summon a violent silence, that has been suppressed, channelled into the repetitive and banal.'<sup>51</sup> As if to emphasise the recentering of experience and feeling within this experimental form of enquiry for its duration its 'observers' could see only very little apart from the floor and others' feet.<sup>52</sup> 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', published in *Inventory*'s final issue brings the method into explicit dialogue with James Clifford's 'ethnographic surrealism' and 'return[s] to the supermarket' to consider again the applicability of diagonal classification to UK consumer society.<sup>53</sup> These statements assume a different register from almost all other texts in the journal, they reflect on the project as a whole, over time, exercising the varying modalities *Inventory* might assume (collecting, exhibition, flyposting, radio, publishing, performance).<sup>54</sup> Whilst the group initially maintained a certain opacity to their proximity to Bataille as a source for their appropriation of the dissident surrealism, dissident sociological tradition, in the final issue of the journal directly tackles the method's relation to surrealism explicitly:

[I]t is a mistake to assume that, in its early days at least, this was a visual art movement at all – this altered guise came later and was mostly the work of one individual, Andre Breton. Instead, if one looks at early issues of *La Revolution Surrealiste* or the early writings of, say, Louis Aragon, Roger Caillois or 'dissident' Georges Bataille, one finds an attitude that is concerned with the critical examination, and, therefore transformation,

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ourselves.' quoting Mitchell Dean, 'Sociology After Society', in David Owen (ed.), *Sociology After Post-Modernism*, London: Sage, 1997, quoted in *Inventory*, Coagulum', *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.1, 2000, pp.4-11, p.5

49 'Coagulum', op. cit., p.6.

50 For example, 'There is a radical incompatibility between the demands of scientific objectivity and the personal human involvement which participant observation necessarily entails'. Bronislaw Malinowski quoted in Dell Hymes (Ed.), *Reinventing Anthropology*, New York: Vintage, 1974, p.33.

51 'Coagulum', op. cit., p.6.

52 'Our heads buried, one could only be partially aware of the persons next-door although we felt entirely comfortable being in such close proximity to each other.' Ibid., p.7

53 *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-159.

54 See also *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5; *Inventory*, 'Fierce Sociology' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8; *Inventory*, 'Do You Feel Crushed?', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8; *Inventory*, 'Without Intent', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.4-9, *Inventory*, Coagulum', *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.1, 2000, pp.4-11 and *Inventory*, 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology', *Inventory* Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.4-7.

of material phenomena, images and ideas – a form of ethnographic surrealism, a diagonal science.<sup>55</sup>

By making this connection explicit, in their final editorial, *Inventory* articulate their project (albeit retrospectively) to a debate which runs from surrealism to ethnography in the interwar period, and was revived from the position of critical ethnography in the late-1980s and began to have a transformational impact upon firstly, surrealist research, and subsequently, theoretical discourses on contemporary art practice. The journal's deployment of its method develops incrementally over the course of its publishing history, informed by hints, experiments, tests and trials. In a sense we arrive at a full sense of the method's historicity only by its end. However, through this relation to time the method can be figured as something which is something which only takes shape through the activity of publishing itself, immanent to its divagating process and the involvement of contributors as co-researchers.<sup>56</sup> The method bookends the beginning and end of the journal's movement, firstly as *animus* then latterly as a kind of key with which to understand the striving of the journal towards 'open intellectual experience' and finally as an open enquiry which is 'simultaneously investigation and intervention', a 'provocation that could summon further images and interpretations'.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, by the end of the complete run of *Inventory* journal we arrive at the method's origins, the radical reading of surrealism which launched the journal, but the method is also presented as something unfinished and incomplete, a project that summons and opens itself to further 'interpretations'.

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55 *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-159.

56 In Chapter 5 I discuss Steve Beard's 'Anthropofferjism Manifesto', op. cit., which develops a post-colonial literary-anthropological 'take' on the journal's method.

57 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', op. cit., p.151.

**11. Active techniques**

- a. Conscious drifting (with notebook and pocket camera).
- b. Play.
- c. Active and deliberate intervention.
- d. Disguise and masking.

**12. Active techniques and Chance**

**13. Autotheorisation**

- a. The essay.
- b. Emblematics.
- c. Bibliographical research.
- d. Diagonal Science.

**14. Note-taking and carding**

**15. How to minimise bias**

- a. Verification by use of a second source of information.
- b. Statistical tests for internal verification.
- c. Assessment of plausibility.

**16. How to play with bias**

- a. The optimum conditions for truth is a lie.
- b. Contaminated analysis.
- c. Bewitched spot.
- d. Violent silence.

**17. The scope of experiment**

- a. Without beginning.
- b. Without end.
- c. Taboo.
- d. Transgression.

**18. Summary and conclusions**

- a. The limits of post factum analysis - everything and nothing.
- b. The experiment in time and instinct.
- c. The value of an analysis that is simultaneously a mirror and a critique.
- d. Merits and weaknesses - life is not enough.
- e. Who shall survive?



Image: Inventory, 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology', *Inventory* Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.4-7, pp.6-7



# Ethnographic Surrealism or Surrealist Ethnography

‘Ethnographic Surrealism’ is a term coined by postmodern ethnographer James Clifford in 1981.<sup>58</sup>

The term became the scene of controversy and debate throughout the early-1990s and up until the late-2000s.<sup>59</sup> Adam Scrivener made clear he had been made aware of both Clifford and Hal Foster’s texts through a course taught by Michael Richardson at SOAS.<sup>60</sup> This section probes this debate

58 James Clifford, ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 23 / Issue 04 / October 1981, pp 539-564.

59 Substantial debate around the term began in the early 1990s, its most concentrated form was in a special issue of *Visual Anthropology Review* published in 1991. Several articles from this review are listed below among other key contributions to this debate: Hal Foster, ‘Exquisite Corpses’, *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol.7 No.1, 1991, pp.51-61; Jean Jamin, ‘Anxious Science: Ethnography as a Devil’s Dictionary’, *Visual Anthropology Review* Vol.7 No.1, 1991, pp.84-91; Martin Jay, ‘The Disenchantment of the Eye: Surrealism and the Crisis of Occularcentrism’, *Visual Anthropology Review* Vol.7 No.1, 1991, pp.15-38; Suleimann, Susan Rubin, ‘Between the Street and the Salon: the Dilemma of Surrealist Politics’, *Visual Anthropology Review* Vol.7 No.1, 1991, pp.39-50; Michael Richardson, ‘An Encounter of Wise Men and Cyclops Women Considerations of Debates on Surrealism and Anthropology.’ *Critique of Anthropology* Vol.13 No.1, 1993, pp.57–75. Denis Hollier, ‘The Question of Lay Ethnography: The Entropological Wild Card’, in Dawn Ades, Simon Baker, (Eds.), *Undercover Surrealism. Georges Bataille & Documents*, London: The Hayward Gallery & Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2006, pp.58-64; Michèle Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim to the Collège de Sociologie*, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2002; Steven Webster, ‘The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography’ in M. Manganero (ed.), *Modernist Anthropology from Fieldwork to Text*, Princeton, 1990, pp.266-99; Denis Hollier, ‘Surrealism and Its Discontents’, *Papers of Surrealism*, No.7, 2007, n.p., available <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/> The framework of the debate was significantly reorientated away surrealism and towards a discussion within the parameters of contemporary art practice and theory the end of the 1990s when Hal Foster published an essay entitled ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’ firstly in the collection *The Traffic in Culture* and subsequently in the anthology of his own writing *The Return of the Real*. Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ in George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, Eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1995) 302–308 and Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, pp.171-203. Significantly in Foster’s essay the stepping-off point this time was not only the debate within anthropology, but also a trajectory from conceptual art, institutional critique to post-conceptual contemporary art. One of Foster’s starting points was the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth’s singular essay, Joseph Kosuth, ‘The Artist as Anthropologist’ *The Fox*, No.1, 1975, pp.18-30, reprinted in *Art After Philosophy*, London and Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991, pp.107-128.

60 Adam Scrivener in conversation with the author, Toulouse, August 2016. Richardson contributed to *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, Vol.4 No.3 2002 and (their final issue) Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005. In 2001 Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, also an *Inventory* contributor, compiled an anthology of political tracts by surrealists emphasising the connections between Breton and Bataille’s circles and a globally distributed range of surrealist factions with widespread collective and political engagements. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski eds., *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations* (Trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski), London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2001. Whilst this publication post-dates *Inventory*’s founding, it may still be possible that the approach and lexicon of this publication’s editors was influential on the group’s own exploration of surrealism and particularly the heretical surrealism, ‘base materialism’ and ‘sacred sociology’ of Bataille. Richardson characterised the College’s approach as a form of ‘Sociology on a Razors’ Edge’ which has correspondences, at least in a titular sense, to *Inventory*’s formulation of a ‘Fierce Sociology’. Moreover, the extensive introduction to Richardson’s anthology of Bataille’s writings on surrealism, *The Absence of Myth* published in 1994, emphasises the longevity of Bataille’s surrealist and communist proclivities, and makes a forceful argument that the two terms, in Bataille’s thought, necessarily imply each other. The pair (Fijałkowski & Richardson) also translated Michael Surya’s intellectual biography of Bataille in 2002, a book which makes plain the full extent of Bataille’s practical and theoretical political engagements with left communism in the pre-World War II period. Michael Richardson’s articles for *Inventory* are ‘Paris in its Myths’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997; ‘Touched By Japan’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3 2002; ‘The Look of Collette Peignot’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005.

with an emphasis upon the ways in which *Inventory*, as a group and as a journal, significantly transformed its parameters and substance. In the article in which he formulated the term, Clifford draws upon a number of tendencies within surrealism and characterises the particular development of ethnography, or ethnology as it was known, in the 1920s and '30s in France as specifically modernist and subversive.<sup>61</sup>

This account of French ethnography is supported from within that particular discipline by Jean Jamin, Director of research at l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, who argued, after Clifford, that 'an indiscipline was the foundation of this science.'<sup>62</sup>

[B]ecause it had as its object mankind, society, culture, language and knowledge, and because it was concerned with sociological and cultural conditioning – ethnology saw itself as invested with a considerable critical, non-conformist function.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst Jamin gives credence to some of the ways that we might think surrealism and ethnography together, as mutually illuminating, modernist and subversive practices, he also substantially qualifies the extent to which this was true. Ethnography after all was 'formed' and 'institutionalised' as a science – an 'anxious science', in Jamin's words. Yet, surrealism would not let itself be limited by mere science, it 'could not tolerate the interposition of "science" between its gaze and the object of its gaze.'<sup>64</sup> In Jamin's view, ethnography partook of a 'second crisis in European consciousness' and participated in the 'critique of reason'. There were perhaps freedoms which ethnography eventually denied by institutionalising

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Of these, both 'Paris in its Myths' and 'The Look of Collette Peignot' have notable connections to Georges Bataille and his circle. 'Paris in its Myths' refers directly to an essay by Roger Caillois, developed within his collaborations with Bataille in the College of Sociology, 'Paris, A Modern Myth'. As the introduction to the English language anthology of Caillois' writings, *The Edge of Surrealism*, notes: the essay shares 'numerous similarities' [...] with Walter Benjamin's various studies of Baudelaire and 'Paris Capital of the XIXth Century,' written in the latter part of the 1930s'. 'Introduction to "Paris, a Modern Myth", in Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, Ed. Claudine Frank, (Trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Nash). Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Richardson's final article for *Inventory*, 'The Look of Collette Peignot', surveys the written work and associations of Laure (Collette Peignot's nickname and pseudonym), lover of Bataille; editor and contributor to *La Critique Sociale*; attendee of *The College of Sociology*; and member of Bataille's secret group *Acephale*, seeks to evaluate Peignot's 'original contribution to the history of ideas'. p.68. Michael Richardson's essay 'Touched By Japan', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3, 2002, contains no direct relation to Bataille or his circle, however, the discussion of cultural difference, travel and European cultural encounter with Japan is of interest for accounting for *Inventory*'s relationship to critical ethnography.

61 From its disenchanted viewpoint, stable orders of collective meaning appear to be constructed, artificial, and indeed often ideological or repressive. The sort of normality or common sense that can amass empires in its fits of absentmindedness or wander routinely into world wars is seen as a contested reality, to be subverted, parodied, and transgressed.

62 'Anxious Science', op. cit., p.84.

63 Ibid., p.88.

64 Ibid., p.84.

itself, nonetheless it adopted the mantle and rigours of its scientific status with anxiety rather than disciplinary pride and power. For Jamin, at least at that time, surrealism and ethnology represented

two distinct regions of the same critical space: a space which purports to map the paths used by reason in its attempts to know mankind – including those paths which traverse the irrational.<sup>65</sup>

This is, as I understand, very much the mode in which *Inventory* understood ethnography and surrealism, however this was not as they found them, so the conjoining of the two had to be re *invented*.<sup>66</sup> The extent of the connection between surrealism and ethnography became the scene of some controversy after Clifford's text was published, and there are suggestions that he appeared to exaggerate actually mostly isolated concrete connections with the apparent aim of inflating 'ethnographic surrealism' into a cultural tendency: 'If *Documents* appears today as a rather strange context for the purveying of ethnographic knowledge, in the late twenties it was a perfectly appropriate, that is, *outré*, forum.'<sup>67</sup> Denis Hollier is insistent that this was not the case: '[w]as there, therefore, a set of ethnographers in France around 1955 who, around 1930, had been surrealists? Who had all collectively followed the same itinerary from Bohemia to the C.N.R.S.? The problem is that there is no record of any such group. In fact, whatever fascination James Clifford's retrospectively tempting concept of "ethnographic surrealism" may still exert, such a hybrid was never bodied forth.'<sup>68</sup> Certainly those who counted themselves as both fully surrealists and fully ethnographers (though usually these remained separate moments) can only be limited to the two examples of Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless amidst a wealth of indications of ethnography's influence over surrealism and artistic modernism in general, there is little sign of the opposite cultural movement.<sup>70</sup> However, it remains senseless to isolate Bataille from the

65 'Anxious Science', op. cit., p.85.

66 Sadly outside the scope of this study is a historical reconstruction of the reception of surrealism and sociology in the UK. However, it is crucial to understand that sociology and to a certain extent anthropology had by at least the 1970s become a state science tarnished both by authoritarianism and colonialism in both its state capitalist forms (east and west). I deal with aspects of the crisis of Anthropology in the subsequent chapter.

67 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', op. cit., p.548.

68 Denis Hollier, 'Surrealism and its Discontents', op. cit., p.1.

69 See the capsule biographies contained in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, op. cit., p.162.

70 An exception is perhaps Roger Caillois who latterly denounced significant figures in French ethnography for their surrealism. 'At the turn of 1955, Caillois published a particularly bitter attack on ethnography in the *Nouvelle Nouvelle revue française*, under the title 'Illusions Against the Grain.' Responding to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Race and History*, a booklet released under the aegis of UNESCO, Caillois denounced the ethnologist's refusal to rank cultures hierarchically, according to their supposed positions on a single, continuous scale of development. According to Caillois, Lévi- Strauss (who published *Tristes tropiques* only a few weeks later) was merely the most recent and visible representative of a profession – ethnography – which, while claiming to criticise ethnocentrism, was in fact practising an undercover reverse-Eurocentrism, since for ethnographers their native culture (that of the West) remained the polarizing axis, even though they were committed to qualifying it negatively

influence of either surrealism or ethnography.<sup>71</sup> This thesis then adopts a third position in which ethnography and surrealism met and mutually influenced each other and understands that modernist art provided a gateway as a vehicle of cultural translation for the emerging ethnographic discourses. Furthermore it explores the legacy of Clifford's text as a moment in which brief the fusion of politics, ethnography, aesthetics and philosophy developed by Bataille's dissident surrealist circle returned to inform a renewal of critical theory, cultural studies, ethnography and discourses surrounding contemporary art.

## Anxious Science

For Jamin and others, science remained the critical line separating the two projects. An invisible aspect of scientific disciplines is how they reproduce themselves as disciplines. This means they necessarily need to confirm not only new results, but also the method that produces those results.

If both [ethnography and surrealism] extend invitations to travel to the far reaches of 'otherness' to discover the 'savage heart,' one discipline is committed to preserving it as such, listening for the echo of repressed and buried voices there, and the other is committed to explicating it through concepts and an interpretive grid.<sup>72</sup>

Surrealism, in both its regular and 'dissident' strands, did generate concepts, but it certainly did not create or filter them through 'interpretive grids'. This also raises a fundamental problem, if ethnography was committed to the enlightenment vision of expanding rational

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as often as they could. Most surprisingly, Caillois's conclusion traced the source of ethnography's crime against Western civilisation to surrealism, claiming that the latter was imbued with a cultural resentment that led it systematically to ridicule everything the West complacently prided itself on. Having denounced the ethnologist as a traitor, Caillois stripped away his mask and exposed... a surrealist.' Denis Hollier, 'Surrealism and its Discontents', *Papers of Surrealism* Issue 7, 2007, p.1.

71 Benjamin Noys critiques Michael Richardson's attempts to portray Bataille as a sociologist or philosopher. '[Bataille's] work has been used by Michael Richardson to supply a new social theory of the emergence of the human, but this is a misreading. [...] The concept of human nature is our attempt to grasp a timeless substance theoretically, but all we grasp are perishable elements that slip from our hands. [...] Bataille cannot provide a new or 'radical' social theory but subjects social theory to parody that cannot be contained within the confines of theory.' Benjamin Noys, Noys, Benjamin. *Georges Bataille a Critical Introduction*. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2000, p.22. Stuart Kendall's contention rather works from an opposite direction to challenge Richardson's presentation of Bataille as a surrealist. 'Richardson forces a liaison between Bataille and Surrealism that never took place. Second, by isolating those writings from the rest of Bataille's work as 'writings on Surrealism', Richardson draws the rest of Bataille's work away from Surrealism, to which it is surely proximate. Bataille often writes against Surrealism but that does not make him a Surrealist.' *Georges Bataille*, op. cit., FN#2 p.219.

72 Ibid., pp.84-85.

knowledge making it clear, Jamin's quote seems to suggest surrealism carried inside it a will to preserve difference as different, to maintain a certain opacity at reason's borders. Moreover, there was little, according to Jamin, in terms of real transfer of methods or concepts between them.

Even if there had been complicities and affinities between the two, or mutual defections from one field to the other, that does not mean that there were transfers of methods or concepts.<sup>73</sup>

For Jamin, the magazine and the museum were the two key sites where encounters between surrealism and anthropology took place.<sup>74</sup> These two sites are equally central to both *Inventory's* exhibiting and publishing practices and as we have seen and shall see they thought them through surrealism. Surrealism's encounter with ethnography involved a crisis of reason, a clash of perspectives, a rupture in object relations and ways of looking, but also, from within that crisis it arguably sought something it wished to preserve. What shall be the main focus of what I developed further in what follows, is the question of whether Clifford's concept contributed to something akin to a hybrid ethnographic surrealism bodying forth, if in a self-consciously indisciplined and minor way and in completely altered circumstances from its first outing in the interwar period in France?

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.84

<sup>74</sup> Jamin's discussion of the Musee de l'Homme is central to his article, as are the journals *Documents* and *Minotaur*, Ibid.



Image: Cover of the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (1934) covering the famous mission to Dakar – Djibouti of which Michel Leiris was a part



# The Artist As Ethnographer

‘Who are the magicians of the earth?’ [...] ‘Doctors? Politicians? Plumbers? Writers?  
Arms Merchants? Farmers? Movie Stars?’

– Barbara Kruger<sup>75</sup>

Making a key intervention in the debate begun by Clifford, art historian Hal Foster substantially transformed its ground in the mid-1990s by publishing a text conceptualising both elements of interwar surrealism and post-conceptual contemporary practices under the paradigm of ‘the artist as ethnographer’.<sup>76</sup> Revisiting Benjamin’s famous formulation of the ‘artist as producer’ Foster proposes that a ‘new paradigm’ has overtaken the artist as producer, whilst reproducing its structure,

In this new paradigm the object of contestation remains in large part the bourgeois-capitalist institution of art (the museum, the academy, the market, and the media). Its exclusionary definitions of art and artist, identity and community. [...] But the subject of association has changed: it is the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the committed artist most often struggles.<sup>77</sup>

For Foster, this ‘ethnographic model’ has become generalised ‘covertly or otherwise’ for ‘artist, ‘artist, critic, or historian’; proponents of ‘cultural studies and new historicism’.<sup>78</sup> This ethnographic turn, which Foster conceives very much as a turn away from the proletarian and towards the ethnic or cultural other in line with the general waning of class as central organising category within social struggles following the 1960s, is, according to philosopher of contemporary art, Peter Osborne, also a precondition of the global development of contemporary art after the 1960s and its intensified expansion after 1989.<sup>79</sup> *Inventory* were clearly familiar with Foster’s article as well as Clifford’s and it seems that the debate impacted upon their choice to formulate a related paradigm which would deepen the sociological element at the expense of the artistic in their own formulation: ‘fierce

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75 Quoted in Hal Foster, ‘1989: Les Magiciens de la Terre’, in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900*, London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005 pp.617-621, p.617.

76 There are two version of this text. Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ in George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, Eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1995) 302–308 and Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, pp.171-203.

77 ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Return of the Real*, op. cit., p.173.

78 ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Traffic in Culture*, op. cit., p.306 –307, p.305.

79 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. 1 edition. London ; New York: Verso Books, 2013, pp.163-164.

sociology'.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, *Inventory* invented, on the basis of their own radical reading of surrealism, 'an anthropology of a more radically transcultural kind'.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless Foster's account is of great interest. Whilst the criticism of superficial artistic appropriations of ethnographic authority as 'flânerie' would appear not to have much traction with regard to *Inventory*,<sup>82</sup> instead they would seem to be much closer to what Foster calls 'rogue investigations of anthropology' which 'possess vanguard status today' and have the most value in his typology of practices, because 'it is along these lines that the critical edge is felt to cut most incisively'.<sup>83</sup> *Inventory* evade a number of the other problematic scenarios in Foster's typology. For example, one of the most problematic areas for Foster is the 'sponsored' nature of many quasi-anthropological projects where 'the ethnographic mapping of a given institution or a related community is a primary form that site-specific art now assumes'.<sup>84</sup> Whilst there are one or two projects, for which I shall reprise and apply this critique in later chapters, carried out by the group, as a journal *Inventory* largely remain not only unsponsored, but sovereign, autonomous and critical with regard to these institutional agendas. Secondly, another key element is the problematic exploration of 'cultural otherness' and the attendant problem of 'ideological patronage' (Benjamin's phrase) which Foster associates with the new ethnographic model – 'this "impossible place" has become a common occupation of artists, critics, and historians alike'.<sup>85</sup> Discussing their Coagulum action, *Inventory* contend, '[w]e had no desire to transform social life into art or vice versa'.<sup>86</sup> With regard to their method, *Inventory* contrasted it with art, claiming instead their sociology was 'not an attempt to fix an image of social phenomena, or a particular flow of material culture. In fact the will to fix such instances (in Art for example), to render them knowable and emptied of rage, is sheer folly'.<sup>87</sup> Against Foster's schema *Inventory* also distinguish themselves through 'turn[ing] the anthropological gaze back on ourselves'.<sup>88</sup> They were not like Foster's artist-cum-ethnographer flying around the world setting up community projects or delivering palatable exotic others to biennials. However, the structural appeal of anthropology as the 'science of alterity'; that it 'takes culture as its object'; is 'contextual'; 'is interdisciplinary' and 'self-crit[cal]' and the structural consequences of this appeal for art are perhaps the most telling in characterising the common conditions of advanced art after the 1970s and why ethnography or

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80 The idea of 'ethnographic surrealism' is cited explicitly in *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project: a Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-161, p.151. Adam Scrivener made clear he had become aware of both texts through a course taught by Michael Richardson at SOAS, Adam Scrivener in conversation with the author, Toulouse, August 2016

81 *Anywhere or Not at All*, op. cit., p.163.

82 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Traffic in Culture*, op. cit., p.304.

83 Ibid., p.305

84 Ibid., p.306

85 Ibid., p.307.

86 *Inventory*, 'Coagulum', *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.1, p.7.

87 *Inventory*, 'Fierce Sociology', op. cit., p.5.

88 Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, London: Flamingo, 2000, p.31.

anthropology answers to these conditions. Foster claims that through the political, theoretical and artistic developments of the 1950s and 60s ‘art thus passed into the expanded field of culture that anthropology is thought to survey.’<sup>89</sup> Minimalism and conceptual art being particularly crucial in establishing access to and even the necessity for art to go out into and explore this ‘expanded field’.<sup>90</sup>

## The Artist as Anthropologist

Indeed there is an earlier link between this idea of the ‘expanded field’ and the promise of anthropology through Joseph Kosuth’s essay, ‘The Artist as Anthropologist’, written for *The Fox* a journal for which I have already made connections to as a viable model for *Inventory* in Chapter 2.<sup>91</sup> Kosuth’s text begins with a ‘mosaic’ of quotations from anthropologists, political activists, philosophers and historians of science. Following this, Kosuth’s ‘Theory as Praxis: a Role for “Anthropologized Art”’ is a somewhat rambling text which seeks to argue the possibility not only of understanding the artist in ‘post-modern times’ as a kind of anthropologist, but also asserts that artists conceived this way might be able to ‘accomplish what the anthropologist has always failed at.’<sup>92</sup> Whilst Kosuth does not quite say what it is that the anthropologist has always failed at or ‘artist-as-anthropologist’ might succeed at, he does say what it is *not*. ‘The hope for this understanding is not in the search for religio-scientific truth, but rather to utilize the state of our constituted interaction.’<sup>93</sup> Arguing that ‘The artist is a model of the anthropologist *engaged*’, the suggestion, supported by substantial quotations (from Max Horkheimer, anthropologist Bob Scholte and many others), is that the artist is capable of contributing to cultural understanding through an anthropological theory-praxis within a culture rather than outside of it.<sup>94</sup> Kosuth’s model represents

89 ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Traffic in Culture*, op. cit., p.306.

90 The expanded field is a phrase used by Foster in his arguments for the attraction of art to anthropological methods: ‘First, anthropology is prized as the science of alterity; in this regard it is second only to psychoanalysis as a lingua franca in artistic practice and critical discourse alike. Second, it is the discipline that takes culture as its object, and it is this expanded field of reference that post-modernist art and criticism have long sought to make their own.’ ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Traffic in Culture*, op. cit., p.305. However it also has a specific resonance with early attempts to theorise minimalism i.e. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’ in Foster, Hal, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New York: New Press, 2002, pp.31–42.

91 Joseph Kosuth, ‘The Artist as Anthropologist’ *The Fox*, No.1, 1975, pp.18-30, reprinted in *Art After Philosophy*, London and Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991, pp.107-128.

92 ‘The Artist as Anthropologist’, op. cit., p.27.

93 Ibid.

94 Here quotations by anthropologist Bob Scholte problematise ‘science’ in very similar terms to *Inventory*. ‘The basic reason for this lack of self-reference lies in the widely held assumption that there is, and should be, a discontinuity between experience and reality, between the investigator and the object investigated. If we accept this assumption (which, ironically, is no longer tenable or practical even from a strict scientific point of view) the scientist can afford to remain largely indifferent to his own existential, sociological, historical and philosophical environment.’ Bob Scholte quoted in Ibid., p.24.

a rejection of his former fidelity to Wittgenstein's form of investigation and an affirmation, or rather annexing, of the cultural relativism of anthropology as art as a means to overcome the subject-object dichotomy operative in other sciences.<sup>95</sup> Kosuth's text is not only interesting for positing an early articulation of 'post-modernism' as an overcoming of modernism as objective and scientific culture. This text and its moment is a significant precursor to *Inventory* because it drew from the model of anthropology an expanded form of enquiry and activity which could incorporate the subjectivity and objectivity of the researcher.<sup>96</sup> This is something which is missing from Foster's model, whose direction very much tracks the geopolitics of the break-up of eastern and western blocs alongside the global expansion of contemporary art (exemplified by the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* held at the Centre Georges Pompidou (1989)) and an understanding of ethnography, reconstructed through art, as a mode of access to the cultural other more or less informed by the trace of those same colonial and post-colonial cultures which were the material object of so much modernist anthropology, albeit relocated via migration and westernisation.<sup>97</sup>

The key problem of the applicability of Foster's model to *Inventory* is their resistance to and indeed critique of ethnography or art as a discourse on the *other*. *Inventory* did not centre their sociology on the other but turned the 'anthropological gaze' upon 'ourselves'.<sup>98</sup> The findings of these researches were not returned to the art institution but to the journal. Foster only considers the possibility of the postmodern artist becoming a bad ethnographer, not the possibility of para-academic engagement with ethnographic discourse. The journal struggled against simplistic identity thinking and frequently satirised the superficial belief in identities as founded upon anything other than the driving necessities of a coercive consumerist economic system. In practical terms, the journal adopted a resolutely anti-identitarian stance: through the creation of an anonymous container *Inventory*; an anonymous phantom organisation subject/object as editorial-author; and this permitted proliferating forms of anonymity inside the journal (pen names, self-institutional groups)

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95 On Kosuth's change of direction at this point in his career see *ibid.*, fn#3 page 30. What is perhaps intriguing here is that it makes plain that Kosuth is responding at once to a perceived end of modernism and to a perceived 'ethnocentrism' at the heart of his previous *Investigations* series. That these are articulated together seems of significance. There is then latent in this decision to turn towards anthropology – a first notable post-war articulation of the ethnographic turn in art – a version of post-colonial or theory of race to which Kosuth is implicitly responding.

96 'In this Post-Modern, para-Marxist situation that the artist-as-anthropologist finds him or herself in, is a world where one realises that *objective* explicit art means (in Sapir's sense) a spurious culture. Implicit art is an art of lived subjectivity, but at this point unreal and culturally lost in our technological era.' *Ibid.*, p.29.

97 Of the conjuncture of *Magiciens de la Terre* Foster wrote, 'The year 1989 was a time for reappraisal of rhetoric on several fronts. Not only had the opposition between the First and Third Worlds already fallen apart, along with the dichotomy between metropolitan centers and colonial peripheries that had structured the relation between modern and tribal art. But so, too, had the opposition between the First and Second Worlds broken down, as signaled by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November.' '1989: Les Magiciens de la Terre', *op. cit.*, p.617.

98 *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

extended to lexical identity through the attack on the stability of categories and words in the Glossary. Indeed, *Inventory* are most explicit about politics where they talk about their own self-organisation as a publishing initiative.

Individual output is too limited to create a discursive space. It is an attempt to represent an abolition of the cult of the individual. The trick is not to be seduced by the cult of the collective either. *Inventory* does not usually operate as a collective in any standardised social or political sense; it gives extended shelter, beneath which the ranting energy of the ego can retain its acute volume, anonymity, its shadowy sense of ubiquity, and both can retain fluid positions of submission and dominance.<sup>99</sup>

Though Foster is not explicit, the waning of class and the workers' movement in terms of an identity to affirm is clearly a strong lever shifting the balance from the central identity of the worker, towards the diffuse figure of the subaltern.<sup>100</sup> The ramifications of class decomposition in the late- 20th and early-21st century are certainly an interesting object in discussion with regard to *Inventory*'s practice, these tend to emerge in discussions around specific sites and social issues (e.g.) housing and in terms of the composition and working conditions of the editorial group and contributors.<sup>101</sup> We can find almost nowhere *Inventory* falling into this trap of the exoticisation of new ciphers for the subaltern. However, the strategy of 'self-othering' which Foster associates with the 'dissident surrealism' of Bataille and Leiris<sup>102</sup>, and which we can extend to the 'surrealist ethnography' of Mass Observation, which Clifford cites positively, is clearly a complex in which we can implicate *Inventory*. Yet, firstly, particularly after the reconstruction above and in the previous chapter, I can contend that in these interwar practices these strategies did not amount merely to 'rituals' but positions from which to think cultural problems in their difficulty from a relation of immanence. This is not to say that Foster's critiques do not have fruitful resonances with *Inventory*

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99 *Inventory* quoted in *Indent*, op. cit., p.35.

100 The meaning historically of the identity of the worker as something to affirm has been unpicked in detail by a number of groups converging around the so-called 'communisation current', Anglo-American journal *Endnotes* in particular have contributed substantially to the criticism of the historical and logical basis of this idea and its consequences for revolutionary challenges to capitalism: 'Given that the expected homogeneity of the semi-skilled workforce failed to fully realise itself, it became part of the task of the workers' movement to realise that homogeneity by other means. As we saw above, organisation requires an *affirmable* identity, an image of working class respectability and dignity. When workers failed to fit this mold, the champions of the workers' movement became champions of self-transformation.' *Endnotes*, 'A History of Separation: The fracturing of the workers' movement', *Endnotes*, No.4, October, 2015, available, <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/4/en/endnotes-the-fracturing-of-the-workers-movement> [accessed 8 November, 2018]

101 I return to this question in subsequent chapters (5 and 6).

102 'dissident surrealism explored cultural otherness only in part to indulge in a ritual of self-othering', 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Traffic in Culture*, op. cit., p.303.

as a project. When he argues that a ‘realist assumption’<sup>103</sup> has become almost hegemonic across several tendencies cultural theory and that ‘values like authenticity, originality, and singularity, banished under critical taboo from postmodernist art, return as properties of the site, neighborhood, or community engaged by the artist.’<sup>104</sup> these are clearly scenarios in which *Inventory* can be recognised. Indeed, the dangers whereby ‘rhetorical reversals of dominant definitions to stand for politics as such’<sup>105</sup> would seem to trouble exactly the minor subversions of the Glossary were it not for the fact that *Inventory*’s own conception of politics never pandered to such simplistic claims.<sup>106</sup> On the one hand Foster suggests that after the politics of the cold war the break-up of geographical spheres of influence and bilateral state capitalist blocs led to ‘hybridity’, ‘a negotiation between diverse cultural space-times’ and ‘transit between these categories’ which particularly inflected global art and could be understood to be coextensive with forms of refusal ‘that resists any further “settlement” into separate “zones.”’<sup>107</sup> This statement is suggestive at once of the refusal cultural identity, categorisation and geographic confinement, issues *Inventory* certainly passionately explored. On the other hand, these negations at times imply to Foster an equally vague and localist wish for alterity. The idea that an ‘elsewhere, this outside, is the Archimedean point from which the dominant culture will be transformed or at least *subverted*’ is definitely a structural problem of some critiques formulated within *Inventory*.<sup>108</sup> An aspect of the complexity with which *Inventory* constructed its position of lived and transformative critique is that this outside is quite frequently construed as *immanent* to and *parasitic* of the structures it is seen as subverting or critiquing. These problematic areas, which definitely do turn upon issues inherited from both the ethnographic and surrealist tradition, will be brought to bear on individual contributions (in Chapter 6), the culture of *Inventory* as a project and the political milieu of which it became a part (in Chapter 5) and in terms of the trajectory of 20th century art and theory as we can evaluate it from their standpoint (in my conclusion).<sup>109</sup> However, it is, as I argue, in the extensiveness of its inquiries, its commitment to a

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103 ‘the realist assumption – that the other is *dans le vrai* – remains strong, and often its effect, now as then, is to *detour* the artist.’; ‘my concern is with the *structural effects* of the realist assumption in political, here quasi-anthropological, art, in particular with its siting of political truth in a projected alterity.’ p.303 and p.304 respectively.

104 Ibid., p.306.

105 ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Return of the Real*, op. cit., p.179.

106 ‘we wanted to explore the various economies of social life through social situations, and so our work is political inasmuch as it’s occurring at a time when even the word “socialism” appears to be taboo. [...] By investigating the nature of field work, we turn the anthropological gaze back on ourselves. This could be translated into politics – through the surrealist notion of a permanent state of revolution.’ *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, op. cit., p.31. See also above the discussions in *Indent*.

107 ‘1989: Les Magiciens de la Terre’, op. cit., p.618. This was for Foster still very much tied to surrealism: ‘Such hybrid art, which reworks the Surrealist object to postcolonial ends, is wryly anticategorical in a way that resists any further “settlement” into separate “zones.”’ Ibid., p.619.

108 ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Return of the Real*, op. cit., p.173.

109 Following Nicholas Bourriaud, Marcus Verhagen has pointed out the pitfalls of this multiculturalist interpellation of identity politics into global art around the moment Foster is speaking, ‘[a]ccording to Bourriaud, “the idea of



covert or anomalous practice (not art, not anthropology, not philosophy) and the sustained independence catalysed by the journal, the strength that no one fragment can be understood to be taken for the whole, as well as its ongoing and embattled efforts to not fall foul of the institutional complicities or critical redundancies tabled here, that *Inventory* self-consciously made their intervention in the field described by Foster and Clifford by reaching deeply into its shared sources and hewing closely to the ‘impossible place’ they described antagonistically and with determinate consequences.

## George Bataille and Sacred Sociology

I have argued in the sphere of publicity and journals (in Chapter 2) *Inventory* drew extensively from formats of surrealist research. In the key formulation quoted above they explicitly mention the writing of Louis Aragon, *La Revolution Surrealiste*, Roger Caillois and Georges Bataille. Here, in the following sections I shall discuss the concepts they drew from this interpretation of surrealist research practices, these have been considered as forms of ‘diagonal science’ or ‘ethnographic surrealism’, but can be equally considered to form a ‘dissident surrealism’ or explorations of the ‘edge[s] of surrealism’.<sup>110</sup> In the earlier chapter I began by trying to demonstrate the specificity and originality of *Inventory*’s reception and ‘use’ of Bataille, its grounding in a specifically editorial, ethnographic, sociological and communist interpretation of his work and its associations. In the following sections I try to explore the specifically sociological and philosophical ideas of Bataille

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judging each work according to the codes of its author’s local culture implies existence of viewers who have mastered each culture’s referential field, which seems difficult to say the least”.<sup>2</sup> He identifies this view with the identity politics of the 1980s and 90s (his “multiculturalism”) and a declining postmodernism, which, as he sees it, treats the cultures of diasporic communities and faraway peoples as “essentialist theme parks”.<sup>3</sup> Bourriaud views a now-institutionalised multiculturalism as a constraining force that works to lock down and preserve cultural identities; by the same token and like many writers before him, he disparages the tendency to represent difference in caricatural terms as a source of exotic effects.’ Marcus Verhagen, ‘Translation’s Gradient’, *Afterall*, No.38, Spring 2015. Bourriaud’s account however generates other pitfalls, ‘[t]oday’s radican artists are nomads: traversing territories, combining sign systems and fashioning (provisional) identities on the move, they view other cultures not as fixed and exotic configurations in need of preservation but as dynamic repertoires to be mined. They are also and necessarily translators.’ As *Inventory* themselves pointed out, these ‘translators’ are continuous with ‘a largely middle class, white and male dominated art economy’ and their ‘nomadism’ consists of ‘merely operating along the international trade routes of international corporate cultures EU and international politics, the gentrification and “civilizing” of Eastern Europe [...] through Biennale-isation and more besides.’ See *Inventory*, ‘On Art, Politics and Relational Aesthetics’, *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.166–181, p.176.

110 See Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, Claudine Frank (Ed.), (Trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Nash), Durham: Duke University Press, 2003 or Georges Bataille, ‘The “Old Mole” and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist ’in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, (Allan Stoekl. Trans.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp.32-44, p.40. *Inventory*, ‘An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket’, *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-159.

and his circle as they took form in *Inventory*'s essays and glossary entries. It is evident from the earlier statement then that *Inventory* understood surrealism as a critical method, a research tool permitting the 'critical examination, and, therefore transformation, of material phenomena'.<sup>111</sup> Through the following section we will see which concepts they drew from surrealism, before, in the following chapter, examining how Walter Benjamin, in dialogue with Theodor Adorno, attempted to reconstruct an aesthetic-political critical method by borrowing from surrealism in order to develop an critical theory adequate to the critique of the cultural phenomena of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, and how this also informed *Inventory*'s endeavours.

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111 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', op. cit., pp.151.



Image: Josephine Baker and Georges-Henri Riviere at the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro, June 1933

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## Base Materialism

Bataille was a fiercely religious Catholic before befriending and studying with Lev Shestov a gifted Russian scholar and translator of Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>112</sup> Shestov was a critic of idealism and drew extensively on Nietzsche's work in his belief that man can gain access to ultimate knowledge through ungrounded subjective thought rather than objective reason and verifiability.<sup>113</sup> Working as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale's Department of Medals Bataille encountered scholars from the burgeoning field of ethnography, non-western museology and art history. From his childhood friend and schoolmate Alfred Métraux, an ethnographer of Latin America Bataille gained a knowledge of the sociology of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.<sup>114</sup> With the formation of *Documents* Bataille worked with many former surrealists, German émigré art historian and communist Karl Einstein and the ethnologists Paul Rivet and Georges-Henri Riviere. Riviere was at the time in 'charge of reorganising the chaotic artefact collections of the Trocadero museum, and in 1938 founded the most important museum of anthropology in France, the Musée de l'Homme which Rivet would also work upon.<sup>115</sup> In 1931 Bataille became a member of Boris Souvarine's Cercle Communiste Démocratique, and contributed to the review *La Critique Sociale* where he was exposed to the heterodox Marxist and left communist ideas of Souvarine, Pierre Kaan, Collette Peignot and Simone Weill and published many of his most important inter-war essays. From 1934 he followed Alexandre Kojève's famous lectures on Hegel, which empowered a heterodox and vaguely Marxist interpretation of Hegel. The lectures redoubled Bataille's confidence in the critique of Hegelian idealism.<sup>116</sup>

Bataille's interest in materialism seems to have sprung initially from his syncretic engagement with Durkheimian sociology and desire to challenge the Hegelian idealism of André Breton.

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112 *George Bataille*, op. cit., p.34.

113 Inventory quote Shestov's *All Things Are Possible* (1977) in the epigraph to their important methodological statement Inventory, 'Do You Feel Crushed?', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.4–8, p.4.

114 *George Bataille*, op. cit., pp.66–68.

115 'Encyclopaedia Acephalica', op. cit., pp.9–10. Rivet, was the founder with Marcel Mauss and others of the Institut d'Ethnologie which laid down the ground-rules for field-work which became the basis for all future ethnographic research. Georges Bataille et al, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, London: Atlas Press, 1995, p.9. The musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro and musée de l'homme were magnets throughout the 1920s and '30s for modernist artists such as Pablo Picasso, Amadeo Mondigliani, Man Ray and others.

116 'Kojève's presentation of Hegel's thought was nevertheless decisive. In the same way that Alfred Métraux mediated Bataille's reading of Durkheim and Mauss, Lev Shestov mediated his reading of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky and Adrian Borel mediated his reading of Freud, Alexandre Kojève mediated his reading of Hegel.' *Georges Bataille*, op. cit., p.92.

In an entry on 'Materialism' in *Documents*' Critical Dictionary, Bataille inveighs against a materialism 'whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist'.<sup>117</sup> In its place Bataille proposes '[w]hen the word *materialism* is used, it is time to designate the direct interpretation *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena and not a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis'.<sup>118</sup>

Discussing Bataille's *Documents* entry in *Inventory* alongside the taboo of 'dust' in Le Corbusier's architectural practice, Eric C. Puryear proposes a reading of Bataille's base materialism as a challenge to the idealist materialisms of western philosophy which resolves by tidying-up matter into hierarchically organised concepts.

Base matter destroys the logical correspondence between form and idea. The power of the base (*bassesse*) and formless (*informe*) to interrupt logic is demonstrated in Parmenides' query to Socrates about 'scatological' examples of form. Both Parmenides and Bataille aim for the limit of form by reminding the philosopher of the emasculating power of abject matter. 'Dust,' a Critical Dictionary entry by Bataille, compares the efforts of philosophers and logicians to that of the women servants, who 'arm themselves each morning with a big feather duster, or similarly with a vacuum cleaner' to clear away the accumulated dust. Both the servant and the logician sweep away the abject and retreat into a domesticated vision of reality.<sup>119</sup>

Characterising their own collections as 'fluid mass' the *Inventory* emphasise the unformed, mobile and unordered aspect of their 'constellations'.<sup>120</sup> Disrespecting any 'permanent fixing of things', the text invokes a shaken system of order but one which in itself is never formed.<sup>121</sup> As an epigram to his text on materialism and surrealism, 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist ', Bataille quoted Karl Marx, '[i]n history as in nature, decay is the

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117 Georges Bataille, 'Materialism', in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., pp.15–16, p.15.

118 Ibid., p.16.

119 Eric C. Puryear, 'Dust in the Machine: Le Corbusier's Graffiti A Cap Martin', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2, pp.10-29, p.19.

120 'For, finding and losing, losing and finding, are of as much importance as collecting. Yet collecting must be understood as a perpetual revolt against any form of stasis. Inventory's collections, if they may be defined as such (for this moment at least) are a fluid mass of paper, photos, objects, stickers, labels, in fact anything that may offer differing constellations of meaning once they have been brought into play with other polluted data that can be dredged up.' *Inventory* 'Inventory: Cool, Calm And ...', Vol.2 No.2 1997, pp.4–7, p.4. The notion of constellation is noted specifically by Allan Stoekl with regard to 'many parallels between the project of Bataille and Benjamin' in a note to the canonical English translation of Bataille's writing, Alan Stoekl, 'Introduction', in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., p.xxv.

121 Ibid, see below.

laboratory of life.’<sup>122</sup> For Bataille, decay, violence, death are life-affirming, generative processes. The quote is characteristic of Bataille’s heterodox engagement with Marx and his assertion of a ‘base materialism’, founded upon the ‘unreasonable’ alterity of nature and stress upon the aporia and disjecta of artistic, critical and philosophical discourse.<sup>123</sup> *Inventory* echo the sentiment quoting Paracelsus in a Glossary entry ‘Stone’, ‘[d]ecay is the beginning of all birth’.<sup>124</sup> Nick Norton’s gloss uses Paracelsus to draw out the mutability of the ‘Absolute’ or ‘totality’: ‘in the fixity of stone there is the absolute fluidity of a universe whose nature, as the Absolute, will not be absolutely fixed.’<sup>125</sup> Bataille’s dictionary entry on ‘dust’ conjured an invasion of entropy into the systematic collection of the museum from which ‘nothing will remain’.<sup>126</sup> *Inventory*’s starting point for their special issue ‘Collected’ is the inevitable decay of ‘the vitrified collection’ which ‘can never be maintained and will always fall prey to an opportunistic microbe’.<sup>127</sup>

Thus *Inventory* would oppose any object as meaningful in isolation and would mistrust any serial arrangement or permanent fixing of things which enslaves humankind’s communication through material culture; consigning him/her to thinghood. Only the play of interpretation upon interpretation affirms the sovereign destructive character of life in which relationships, meanings, stories are played out, lived through, annulled, and discarded in the object world.<sup>128</sup>

*Inventory*’s cultural horde or ‘midden’ remain restless, in-never-quite formation. Thus *Inventory* reject the reversal by which man is displaced by ‘things’, a consequence of commodity fetishism as described by Marx, but here attributed to the museum collection. Thinghood in Marx is the result of the reduction of human kind to the commodity of labour power, yet *Inventory*’s retort to the ‘fixing of things’ is to develop a ‘play of interpretation upon interpretation’, its vehicle is the journal. *Documents* as a journal famously operated as a kind of museum without walls, featuring unusually large high quality reproductions of objects drawn from wildly diverging origins. *Inventory*’s essay

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122 Georges Bataille, ‘The “Old Mole” and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist’ in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, op. cit., pp.32-44. This has also been translated as ‘In history as in nature putrefaction is the laboratory of life.’ The sentence appears only in the French version of *Capital*, Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1965, p. 955).

123 Whilst Bataille revels in Marx’s highly material linguistic excess, for example foregrounding the metaphor of the ‘old mole’ for the base position of the proletariat in his theory of capital, in many ways this could be considered an inversion of Marx’s materialism, turning away from the ‘hidden abode of production’ to the realms of circulation and the reproduction, or non-reproduction, of life.

124 Paracelsus quoted in Nick Norton, ‘Stone’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, p.37.

125 Nick Norton, ‘Stone’, op. cit.

126 Georges Bataille, ‘Dust’, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Writers Associated with George Bataille and the Acephale Group*. London: Atlas Press, 1997, pp.42-43.

127 *Inventory* ‘Inventory: Cool, Calm And ...’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997, pp.4–7, p.4.

128 Ibid., p.4.



in its Collected issue features their own installation of domestic objects in placed in the foyer of the Museum of Mankind (1994), while Bataille's essay on 'Dust' in *Documents* features figurative statues or 'mannequins' seemingly heaped in a chaotic arrangement in a museum or department store storeroom. Both essays leak from the museum collection to the magazine page, representing an intended affront to its classicist façade, hierarchical organisation and primacy over the presentation of *social facts*.<sup>129</sup> For Bataille specifically, this animated what he coined 'heterological', concerns closely related to forms of 'base materialism': those pertaining to the study of the heterogeneous elements of a culture, everything which was repressed, displaced, discarded and disregarded. Just as the objects stored in the museum were in some sense the contemporary secularised form of the *sacred*, also, that which is reprehensible, excluded, disgusting, prohibited, also partakes of the taboo and the sacred. *Inventory* repeatedly propose to study all forms of phenomena (without applying hierarchy to them) under a materialist but embodied analysis, 'a sensualist approach is taken [...] by a multi-sensorial analysis, offering a tactile, bodily, nervous, materialism.'<sup>130</sup> From this syncretic conception of matter inscribed within a method which implies subjectivity and body, we move on to the definition of collection and category, then, as alluded to above, the sacred and sovereignty.

## Classification / Collection

Simon Neville's contribution to *Inventory*'s special issue 'Collected' discerns between two types of collection, the indexical and the museum collection.<sup>131</sup> According to Neville, in the museum 'items become "whole" through an act of presentation that serves to isolate the item as a distinct object'.<sup>132</sup> For Neville this isolation is the end of a three step process by which the object is removed from its living context or culture, before classification virtualises the object's 'geographic dispersion' and finally 'the effacement of that originary classification in the mode of autonomous display of the museum.'<sup>133</sup> For Neville 'This journey is isomorphic to the progressive effacement of the signs of human production in the commodity.'<sup>134</sup> This is the first occasion in *Inventory* we find a clear articulation of the comparison between the

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129 Here I am alluding to Émile Durkheim's term, *fait sociaux*, to be discussed shortly.

130 'Do You Feel Crushed', *Inventory*, op. cit, p.5.

131 Simon Neville, 'The World According to Dewey' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.34–35, p.34.

132 Ibid., p.34.

133 Ibid., p.34.

134 'We begin with the index that operates like a gold standard in organising its material on a feudal basis of hierarchies of knowledge, to arrive at the effacement of the origin to which that index refers in the general equivalence of the sign.' Ibid., p.34.

subsumptive act of classification and the subsumption of labour under capital theorised by Marx.<sup>135</sup> Through the concept of ‘subsumption’ Marx describes the systematic domination and incorporation of labour by capital.<sup>136</sup> As Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia writes the concept has wide ranging implications in philosophy, but also relates on a very everyday level to the identification and classification of phenomena, in everyday life as well as in institutional settings.

Conceptually, subsumption immediately connects to a huge range of problems and ideas within philosophy (almost all logic, epistemology and ontology invokes an idea of subsumption taken in its broadest sense, as a mode of classification, inclusion or identification, even where the term itself is not invoked directly) but also to other disciplinary regions (law, art history, informatics, etc.).<sup>137</sup>

Subsumption relates to *Inventory*’s Glossary because through mimesis of the form of the critical dictionary it recalls the formal naming and ordering of concepts at the basis of scientific definition.

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135 This is of interest because Marxian debates around subsumption as a concept have a bearing on what we might call the ‘false totalities’ circulating in debates about the nature of 21st century capitalism and my debate of subsumption therefore informs the discussion of totality in Chapter 4.

136 ‘Subsumption means rather more than just submission. *Subsumieren* really means “to include in something”, “to subordinate”, “to implicate”, so it seems that Marx wanted to indicate that capital makes its own substance out of labour, that capital incorporates labour inside itself and makes it into capital.’ Jacques Camatte, ‘Capital and Community’, (1988) available, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camate/capcom/index.htm> [accessed 20 February 2019].

137 Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia, *The Problem of Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx*, PhD Thesis. Kingston University, 2016, p.2. Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia writes of Kant’s use of the term subsumption ‘The concept of subsumption was bequeathed to Marx from German philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries, beginning with Kant, it was used to conceptualise the process of subordination whereby an individual is brought under a general concept or category, and thus determined as a particular instance of that category. In Kant’s first critique, for example, this process forms the basis for cognition, as intuitions are transcendently subsumed under the categories, and thus given conceptual unity within the continuum of conscious experience. Marx’s use of subsumption retains the conceptual structure of this subordinating particular-universal relationship, but deploys it in an altogether different context.’ Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia, ‘Time and Subsumption’, unpublished paper, 2015. The concept of subsumption is closely related to abstraction. We can relate this to the process of abstraction in computing, the way elements of a programme ‘call’ a densely packed script or function without repeating the whole procedure. Subsumption in Hegel relates to the subsumption of the Particular to the Universal, thought as totality, a system Marx criticises and inverts, or returns to its feet. Marx, initially using subsumption in various preparations of notes for Capital (Grundrisse etc.) He then deploys subsumption in *The Results* (known as the lost Volume 4 of capital) in such a way as relates strictly to the process of production. Marx specifies two forms of subsumption to separate logical and historical processes as aspects of the development of capital. Formal subsumption – the employment of relations of production as capital finds them e.g. the seizing of an existing process and the sale of its products in a capitalistic market. Absolute surplus value, the extension of the working day, or expansion of the quantity of labourers in a production process. Real subsumption – the seizure, development and transformation of social production in its own image, as it suits capital’s ends. Relative surplus value, the intensification of time, introduction of machines and technology which squeezes more surplus labour but encounters new limitations in this drive towards efficiency. We can understand its use as both logical and historical. Up to now the historical, or periodising valences of subsumption have been emphasised, however, more recently, in the 2010s several Marxist scholars have emphasised the validity of formal and real subsumption as logical and not historical categories. See Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia, *The Problem of Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx*. PhD Thesis. Kingston University, 2016 and Endnotes, ‘The History of Subsumption’, *Endnotes*, No.2, April, 2010, pp.130 –153.

Concepts subordinate particularities, ‘philosophy has been, up to this point, as much as science, an expression of human subordination’.<sup>138</sup> However, the Glossary can be understood as generating a form of reverse subsumption or de-subsumption. By re-opening the appearance of the canonical and authoritative dictionary to non-authoritative definition which prioritises subjective experience and diversity the Glossary questions the stability of identities and definitions. While each edition of the Dictionary pretends completion, the journal as a serial and multi-authored form (the dictionary is multi-authored but pretends to singular omnipotent authorship), insists on its unfinished state over time. Classification, identification, naming and subsumption themselves structure value in societies. As Nick Norton questions: ‘why should any price be attached to naming and ordering names? Why should numerical value, created value, run hand in hand with the way things are arranged? Value that slips when touched; the warmth of a living beast.’<sup>139</sup> In their key methodological editorial, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, *Inventory* interpret Georg Simmel’s idea of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ elements of culture along lines which strongly suggest that classification and collection fall on the side of ‘objective culture’, by which ‘forms harden, they in turn, attack and threaten the very individuality that gave birth to them.’<sup>140</sup> Indeed in order to challenge and criticise the basis of values around which society is organised, *Inventory*, to a certain extent, embraced the ‘transformative’ powers of classification, suggesting that in the ‘arrangement of things’ we arrange ourselves.

[T]he entire classificatory endeavour [is] but a means of better picturing ourselves. Better picturing is in turn the image making device from which transformative processes and technologies arise. In fact, one might go so far as to suggest, that the *modus operandi* of collecting and classifying, of taxonomy, is in effect a transformative one.<sup>141</sup>

A paradox ensues because the presentation of a collection implies completeness but the act of classification is ‘transformative’. *Inventory*’s ostensible solution is to diversify the collection, to pay attention to what it excludes, and to diversify the act of classification and definition, to introduce multiple points of view, to allow this openness to interpretation where the dictionary closes it and pretends to finitude. *Inventory*’s evocation of Caillois’ ‘diagonal science’ with regard to their method and transformation into ‘diagonal classification’ in various texts dealing with the classification of commodities suggests transversal connections between categories, refusing the pretense of isolation and finitude of conceptual thinking. Indeed classification has a specific link to Durkheimian sociology and its subversive contribution to disciplinary knowledge might be

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138 Georges Bataille, ‘Pineal Eye’, in *Visions of Excess*, p.80, quoted in *Inventory*, ‘Fierce Sociology’, op. cit., p.6.

139 Nick Norton, ‘Abject/Collect’ *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.36–40, p.40.

140 ‘Do You Feel Crushed’, op. cit., p.4.

141 *Inventory*, ‘Orpheus Street’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1, 1997, pp.4–7, p.6.

considered its synthetic use of classification to challenge the myopic view of ‘specialist disciplines’.<sup>142</sup>

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142 ‘there is room for a synthetic science, which may be called general sociology, or, philosophy of the social sciences . . . [which would] disengage from the different specialist disciplines certain general conclusions, certain synthetic conceptions, which will stimulate and inspire the specialist, which will guide and illuminate his researches, and which will lead to ever-fresh discoveries; resulting, in turn, in further progress of philosophical thought, and so on, indefinitely.’ Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method: And Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method*, Ed. Steven Lukes, (Trans. W. D Halls), New York: Free Press, 2014, p.10. In an essay first published in 1903 Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss developed classification as a tool and medium for the emerging fields of ethnography and sociology to mediate between a researcher’s established culture, his sense of authority and the crisis affected by a cultural encounter with an other. Rodney Needham, ‘Introduction’, Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, Note #2 p.viii.

Secrets are used to bring people closer together.

N. N.



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Image: Nick Norton, 'Secrets', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.81-82



## Science

By invoking a ‘diagonal science’ *Inventory* suggest not the rejection of scientific technique, but its incorporation into a new method and practice. Science, as the guiding logic directing classification, expunges ‘myth’, but a diagonal approach to categories is understood to be potentially restorative of that which science dispels and therefore cannot access. On the one hand Bataille accuses science of being a ‘phenomenon of dissociation’, ‘no more than a fragmentary activity’ and of ‘emptying the universe of its human content’.<sup>143</sup> On the other he proposes ‘enslav[ing] science through the use of weapons borrowed from it’.<sup>144</sup> Following Bataille, *Inventory* assert that science was based upon a ‘mythological conception of the universe’ effectively mechanical. In Jan Harris’ article on the cloning of Dolly the sheep, for example, Dolly is considered in representational and symbolic terms, she is ‘the product of the “universal equality of things” [...] the direct result of commodification’.<sup>145</sup> Other essays in *Inventory* explore science as technique of representation and as mythos.<sup>146</sup> For Bataille it is through a ‘destructive’ sociology which places social phenomena, totality and human experience at its heart that ‘delirium escapes from necessity, casts off its heavy mantel of mystical servitude, and [...] finally only then that, nude and lubricious, it plays with the universe and its laws as if they were toys.’<sup>147</sup> These views were subject to internal controversies in the projects through which Bataille tried to animate them.<sup>148</sup> Yet, rather than

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143 Quotations respectively from Georges Bataille, ‘The Sorcerers Apprentice’, in *The College of Sociology*, op. cit., note p.12. ‘Left to itself, free in the poorest sense of the word (where liberty is only impotence), inasmuch as its legacy as the first condition of existence was the task of dissipating and annihilating mythological phantasms, nothing could keep science from blindly emptying the universe of its human content. But it is possible to use it to limit its own movement and to situate beyond its own limits what it will never attain [...]’ Georges Bataille, ‘Pineal Eye; in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., pp.79–90, pp.80–81.

144 Ibid., pp.81–82.

145 Jan Harris, ‘Behold The Lamb’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.8–13, p.9 quoting Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 2013, pp.211–244, p.217.

146 See, respectively, Damian Abbott, ‘Extensive Bodies’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.117–131 and Steven Claydon & Neil Chapman, ‘The Opposite of a Good Idea’, *Inventory*, (listed as pp.94–, unpaginated insert), Vol.3 No.2 1999.

147 Ibid., pp.81–82. ‘It is only after having passed from these exterior limits of another existence to their mythologically lived content that it becomes possible to treat science with the indifference demanded by its specific nature, but this takes place only on condition that one has first enslaved science through the use of weapons borrowed from it, by making it itself produce the paralogisms that limit it.’ Georges Bataille, ‘Pineal Eye; in *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., pp.79–90, pp.80–81

148 Cf. ‘the College carried with it the idea of the “active sacred”, later “active sociology” and finally redefined as “sacred sociology”, and this was probably the reason for Leiris’s second thoughts, since in Durkheimian terms, it was an inadmissible Conjunction.’ And ‘It was one thing to accept that an active sociology might encompass lived experience if it were bolstered by a proper sociological methodology, but it was another thing altogether for it to consist of lived experience alone.’ Maria Galleti (Ed.), *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, London: Atlas press., 2017, p.84 and p.418.

ignoring or refusing science, it is a critical method that would recover myth and science from the myth of autonomous science not in order to destroy it but to complete it.<sup>149</sup>

*Inventory* interpreted myth, or its absence, as closely bound up with the expansion of Enlightenment reason, understanding it as a ‘split[ting] the universe into two distinct parts’.<sup>150</sup> However, by destroying the irrational constructions of religion it had ‘in fact liberated them from necessity’, the resolution of science and recovery of myth become enjoined in a project of freeing both from instrumentality.<sup>151</sup> This is a complex reconsideration of myth which remains open to ambiguity and misappropriation in the work of both Bataille and *Inventory*.

## Myth

In the essay, ‘Orpheus Street’ and art project ‘Urban Odyssey’, *Inventory*, recalling Caillois’ essay ‘The Mask of the Medusa’, explore the mythic resonances of London street names, ‘Orpheus Street’, ‘Hercules Road’ and so on, opening them up to ‘diagonal classification’.<sup>152</sup> Emphasising the temporary and arbitrary, or impassioned, reorganisation of such phenomena *Inventory* were not only interested in salvaging ‘hidden archaic patterns’ and ‘something “not forgotten”’, but also encouraging wild and socially generated new collective myths within a cultural moment which, with the fall of statist ideologies (the end of the cold war), was beginning to reconsider the emancipatory potential of mythopoeisis.<sup>153</sup>

Where classification separates, myth is understood to articulate and concatenate. *Inventory* understood creative classification as a creative act, as well as a means to challenge the established order of things. While street exploration and psychogeography sustained an aura of mystery and even political agency in London and other European cities in the 1990s, *Inventory*’s essays ‘Orpheus Street’ and ‘An Impossible Project’ undermines such romanticism by applying similar

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149 ‘[the man of science] has renounced the wholeness that characterized his actions so long as he wanted to live out his destiny. For the scientific act must be autonomous, and the scientist excludes any human interest outside of the desire for knowledge.’ ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, p.14. Compare to: ‘In calling for a virulent, mythological representation of the multiple subjectivities that science (rational thought) has excluded, one still has a residue of respect for the need to deal rigorously with objective facts.’ ‘Fierce Sociology’, op. cit., p.6.

150 Ibid., p.6 quoting ‘Pineal Eye’, op. cit., p.80.

151 Ibid.

152 ‘Orpheus Street’, op. cit..

153 I pursue this theme in amongst *Inventory*’s contemporaries in Chapter 5 but here Hollier’s precis of the College of Sociology’s position does well to express the the spirit of secularised myth: ‘myth is the very skin of social life and, consequently, is nothing outside its ritual performance. Myth has no other basis than the social body that it unifies and that actualizes it. It has no existence at all outside the collective rites through which it is activated. Lacking any objective material support, nothing remains of a mythology that has become disaffected. It vanishes leaving nothing behind, nothing to preserve in a museum or a library. It lives or dies, but does not survive.’ Denis Hollier, (Ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, op. cit., p.xxvii.



forms of mythopoesis to the heteronomous environment of the supermarket.<sup>154</sup> Whilst degraded, for *Inventory*, supermarkets and shopping centres were rare centres for collective life in the late-20th Century and remain so at the beginning of the 21st.<sup>155</sup> This was to stage a heretical reading of Bataille's own more 'tragic' interpretation of the absence of myth, bringing it down from the aristocratic and gnostic dreams of a 'lost totality' into the shabby everyday rituals of contemporary survival.<sup>156</sup>

As Bataille conceives here, the promise of the recovery of 'myth' in the inter-war period represented the longing for a sense of completeness that the arrival of industrial society, not to mention the industrial warfare experienced in the first world war, had utterly smashed to pieces. Whilst both *Inventory* and Bataille's articulation of myth is firmly dialectical, understanding that indeed the irrationalism of a society organised for war and profit itself needed to generate useful myths in order to preserve its murderous and exploitative order. A problem of the recovery of myth articulated in the interwar period is that it finds itself difficult to separate from the 'reactionary modernisms' of national socialism and fascism. This is a complex issue, difficult to resolve here because the literature on Bataille's anti-fascism and accusations towards him of 'sur-fascism' and worse is distributed and partial<sup>157</sup>, what is certain is that at a crunch point in the late-1930s Bataille self-consciously attempted to mobilise myth *against* fascism, but pinned under pressure between 'German Caesarism' and 'Soviet Caesarism' this position was quickly obliterated and resolved into a position which Denis Hollier names 'tragic utopia'.<sup>158</sup> *Inventory* absorbed aspects of this legacy and I go on (in Chapter 5) to assess something of the context in which *Inventory* absorbed this debate and elements of anti-fascist debates of their times during a period in which the fall of the

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154 'Orpheus Street', op. cit. and 'An Impossible Project: a Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', op. cit.

155 Cf 'Elephant', op. cit. and 'Coagulum', op. cit., each 'studies' in a sense of the shopping centre.

156 'Myth is born in ritual acts concealed from the static vulgarity of a disintegrated society, but the violent dynamic belonging to it has no other object than the return to a lost totality.' Georges Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', in *The College of Sociology*, 1937-39. op. cit., pp.12-23.

157 Cf. Alan Stoekl's discussion in the 'Introduction' to *Visions of Excess*, pp.xvii-xx. Another sensitive discussion is Denis Hollier, 'Desperanto', Betsy Wing (Trans.), *New German Critique*, No. 67, Legacies of Antifascism, Winter, 1996, pp.19-31.

158 'The RECOMPOSITION OF SACRED VALUES starts when the boots of human existence are repaired, and it can obediently [sic] march straight ahead once again under the whip of hard necessity. The reestablished Pharaohs and Caesars, the heads of the revolutionary parties that today have bewitched half the inhabitants of Europe, have answered the desire to base life again on an irrational urge. But the amount of constraint necessary for the maintenance of too rapidly imposed edifices indicates their profoundly disappointing character. To the extent that there persists a nostalgia for a community through which each being would find something more tragically taut than anything to be found in himself to this extent the concern for the recovery of the lost world, which played a role in the genesis of fascism, has as its outcome nothing other than military discipline and a limited calm, produced by a brutality that destroys with rage everything it lacks the power to captivate.' 'The comedy which – under the pretense of democracy – opposes German Caesarism with Soviet Caesarism, shows what frauds are acceptable to a mob limited by misery, at the mercy of those who basely flatter it. [...] ' Georges Bataille, 'Nietzschean Chronicle' in *Visions of Excess*, pp.202–212, respectively p.204 and p.209.

eastern bloc served to regenerate various fascist movements. By the end of this study we can reflect perhaps more critically on the project to recover myth by *Inventory* and this in some way has a purchase on a present in which various formations of neoreactionary, alt-right and meme culture are seeking to revive an undialectical affirmation of myth as a way to dress-up a renewed ‘conservative politics of antagonistic reproduction’.<sup>159</sup>

## The Sacred and Sacrifice

For the disparate figures gathered within the College of Sociology the sacred consisted amidst a ‘combination of respect, desire, and terror’ as Michel Leiris put it, in one of the four founding texts of the College of Sociology.<sup>160</sup>

[W]hat does my sacred consist of? What objects, places, or occasions awake in me that mixture of fear and attachment, that ambiguous attitude caused by the approach of something simultaneously attractive and dangerous, prestigious and outcast – that combination of respect, desire, and terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred?<sup>161</sup>

The discourse of the sacred, its ‘primary if not decisive importance’, developed highly personal and psychological aspects within Bataille’s circle, but its deployment as a category for the study of universal collective social life originated in the sociology of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.<sup>162</sup> Within their system, the sacred and profane are the central categories through which one can find correspondences across wildly different societies.

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159 Shuja Haider, ‘The Darkness at the End of the Tunnel: Artificial Intelligence and Neoreaction’, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 28 March 2017, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/03/28/the-darkness-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel-artificial-intelligence-and-neoreaction/> [Accessed 2 April, 2017] and Toscano, Alberto. ‘Notes on Late Fascism’. *Historical Materialism (Blog)*, paper was first delivered as a seminar in February 2017 at Simon Fraser University, <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism> [Accessed 25 April 2017]

160 Michel Leiris ‘The Sacred in Everyday Life’, in *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, op. cit., pp.24-31, p.24. This text, previously presented as a lecture to the College was later edited and published in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, grouped together with two other articles, by Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, under the title ‘For a College of Sociology’.

161 Ibid.

162 Quotation from Roger Caillois, ‘The Collège de Sociologie: Paradox of an Active Sociology.’ (Trans.) Susan Lanser, *SubStance* Vol.4 Nos.11/12, 1975, pp.61–64, p.62. Michael Richardson’s article ‘The Look of Collette Peignot’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, explores Peignot’s concept of the sacred, ‘a long way from the Durkheimian notion of the sacred although its roots are doubtless to be found there.’ p.68 Peignot’s essay was written as a response to Michel Leiris’s contribution to the founding of the College of Sociology, ‘The Sacred in Everyday Life’, op. cit.

Things are above all sacred or profane, pure or impure, friends or enemies, favourable or unfavourable; i.e. their most fundamental characteristics are only expressions of the way in which they affect social sensibility. The differences and resemblances which determine the fashion in which they are grouped are more affective than intellectual. This is how it happens that things change their nature, in a way, from society to society; it is because they affect the sentiments of groups differently.<sup>163</sup>

The sacred, in the sense that Mauss and Durkheim intended, was not only applicable to religious institutions, but assumed a fundamental aspect of all social life and the ordering and classification of things. It is this sense which Georges Bataille attempted to develop, radicalise and apply to contemporary society in his work with Roger Caillois (at the time a gifted young pupil of Marcel Mauss) under the rubric of the ‘sacred sociology’ to be developed under the aegis of the College .

Sacred sociology may be considered the study not only of religious institutions but of the entire communifying movement of society. Hence, it contemplates all human activities – sciences, arts, and technology – insofar as they have a communifying value, in the active sense of the word, that is to say as the creators of unity.<sup>164</sup>

It appears that Bataille, as well as differing from Caillois in his rejection of hierarchical social formations, understood the sacred within a dialectical framework which marks a development and transformation of Durkheim and Mauss’ use of the term. For Bataille the sacred designates ‘both the purest elements and their contraries’<sup>165</sup>, explaining the contradiction that what is sacred might also designate a being that can be killed with impunity as in *sacrificed*. As Eric C. Puryear glosses, in an early article for *Inventory*, ‘The sacred, represented for Bataille by the double headed Acephalic god, is both the sacred and the profane.’<sup>166</sup> This dialectical or ‘ambivalent’ character of the sacred, passed from James Frazer, Durkheim and Mauss via Bataille to *Inventory*, and to recognise the importance and significant attraction, for Bataille and subsequently *Inventory*, of the subversive content of the sacred framed specifically within a trajectory of secularisation within modern industrial society.<sup>167</sup> For *Inventory* contributor Matthew Hyland, it was a ‘self-evident secret that

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163 Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, p.50.

164 Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, ‘Sacred Sociology and the Relationships between “Society”, “Organism”, and “Being”’, Saturday, November 20 , 1937, in Denis Hollier (Ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, op. cit., p.74.

165 George Bataille, ‘The Moral Meaning of Sociology’, (originally published in *Critique*, 1946) in Georges Bataille *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, Ed. Michael Richardson, London; New York: Verso, pp.103-112, p.106.

166 ‘Dust in the Machine’, op. cit., p.24.

science hasn't overthrown belief, but refined it beyond recognition.'<sup>168</sup> *Inventory* themselves invoked Bataille's concept of the sacred in the definition of their own method of 'Fierce Sociology' thus:

Human history and present social relationships have always consisted of an infinite web of varying combinations of data (allegiances, beliefs etc.). In other words, varying assemblages of the mechanical and the organic. So that, within the quotidian we find sacred phenomena being summoned, re-enchanted, in differing macro or micro social patterns. Moreover, the everyday contains a mixture of homogeneity, of productive forces, from which all useless elements are excluded, and heterogeneity, which breaks these limits introducing elements which cannot be wholly re-appropriated. In this sense 'the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled'.<sup>169</sup>

As *Inventory* developed a rich and mobile field of analysis out of this initial static display, animating it further and further outside an ethnographic-academic context, the boundaries of their enquiry increasingly pushed at limits which laid outside institutions, in the streets, opening a space between the homeless rock-bottom of class society and the celestial roof of metaphysics.

By excavating the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture, perhaps we will see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even sinister caves where force and human liberty will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of a heaven that today demands the most imbecilic elevation of any man's spirit.<sup>170</sup>

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167 To discuss this aspect of the sacred is obviously to invoke a widely discussed contemporary figure, Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, the theorisation of which retains substantial Batailleian residues. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben discusses Bataille's theory of the sacred as mediated through Hegel and Kojève (in pp.112-113). He also asserts strong criticism, though not entirely convincingly, of what he calls the 'mythologeme' of the 'ambivalence of the sacred' established, according to Agamben, by the Victorian anthropology of William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), p.75. *Inventory*'s own dynamic and dualistic conceptualisations of the sacred appear to conform to this, for Agamben problematic, perspective, 'Existence is dualism, it is life and death, word and deed: "The name of the bow is life; its work is death." as Heraclitus said. The spiritual exists as long as there is a physical: there is no one without the other. The sacred must be despoiled by the profane.' 'Oracular Architecture', op. cit., p.112.

168 Matthew Hyland, 'La Vie Pue Meisseurs', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001, p.93.

169 'Fierce Sociology', op. cit., p.6. The unattributed quotation which ends this passage is from Georges Bataille, *Le Sacre*, Paris: Les Calliers d'art, 1939, translated in Denis Hollier (Ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.427.

170 Georges Bataille, 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealism', op. cit., p.43.

*Inventory* followed Bataille's 'tragic'<sup>171</sup> philosophy of 'impossible experience', binding the investigation of material phenomena to the 'freedom to live at the edge of limits where all comprehension breaks down'.<sup>172</sup> Yet, whilst this may sound extreme and though they were interested in 'belief' and the communifying collective experiences of contemporary crowds, most consistently, *Inventory* sought out the sacred in the banal and every day.

[T]he passionate explorations of a fierce sociology are simultaneously investigation and intervention, a form of inquiry that does not seek the 'heart of the matter' but rather aims to exacerbate it. A provocation that could summon images and further interpretations that force open a horrific magnification of all that we are and all that we might be.<sup>173</sup>

Whilst the museum might provide a contemporary 'degraded' image of the 'sacred', objects out of exchange, but, depending on the chaos or order of the display, inside *symbolic exchange*, there is yet another significant site *other* to the ethnographic museum, presenting objects, apparently, both *in* and *out* of exchange, which powerfully mediated both the surrealists and *Inventory*'s notion of the sacred, and provided opportunities for exercise of their homespun methods. These were the street, the market, supermarket and shopping centre, which featured in their work as a kind of abject museum overdetermined by commerce and consumerism.

## Market and Supermarket

Clifford's famous essay indicates one of the key sites for the Surrealist's exploration of the marvellous as the Parisian street market of the Marché aux Puces, which 'was a source of the unexpected and the significant – significant in ways that suggested beneath the dull veneer of

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171 The 'tragic', or 'tragic nihilism of metropolitan life', is a theme explored in two key *Inventory* articles: Robin Mackay, 'Retro Retard', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.30-35 and *Inventory*, 'Do You Feel Crushed', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, p.4. As 'Do You Feel Crushed' indicates, the concept is indebted to Georg Simmel, himself a great influence on the unorthodox thinkers of the College of Sociology and Walter Benjamin. A discussion of the tragic in *Inventory*'s thought and reception of Bataille will be explored towards the end of this chapter. See for example Bataille, 'But precisely at this point arises the main question about social life. If the man of tragedy bears within him the reality of inmost human existence lost in the immensity of the universe, it is clear that the community – the only place this existence is realized – will have meaning in human terms only to the extent that it provides a place for tragedy, to the extent that it acknowledges the tragic spirit as its own reality.' and 'The tragic spirit is freedom'. 'Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches' a lecture written by Roger Caillois but presented by Bataille to the College of Sociology, Saturday, March 19, 1938, in *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*. op. cit., p.148.

172 George Bataille, *The Impossible*, (Trans. R. Hurley), San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991 p.40.

173 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', op. cit., p.151.

the real the possibility of another, more miraculous world based on radically different principles of classification and order.<sup>174</sup> In *Inventory*, scholar and translator of surrealism Krysztof Fijalkowski revisited this fertile site for the surrealist's clash and reversal of perspectives, supplementing it with the late-20<sup>th</sup> century corollary of the car boot sale (in the early-21st century we might think of online shopping sites such as Ebay or Ali Baba), situating this potent archetype amidst a contemporary commodity culture which had appeared to absorb aspects of the surrealist object's 'juxtaposition and reconciliation of contradictions'.<sup>175</sup>

[F]rom its earliest years, Surrealism suggested a complex equation between city, economic object, self and other, as if window shopping, whether for things or for erotic encounters, means looking through a two-way mirror to reveal the commodity, street and the watcher's expectant reflection, turned together to transparent crystal. To look into a shop window is to recognize yourself, your world, and your desire, real and spectral at the same time.<sup>176</sup>

Complex forms of self-recognition and a tangible sensation of the prospect of becoming lost, is attainable for the male European metropolitan subject in these spaces. However, closer examination indicates that this is an operation achieved through minor, but significant, signs of otherness – which are explicitly gendered and raced. For Fijalkowski, it is 'part souk, part Kurt Schwitters Merz installation' and features 'Algerians selling lost property'.<sup>177</sup> As well as 'shopping for erotic encounters', the surrealists applied an acquisitive to the problematically racialised objects, '*objets sauvages*' which fell under their gaze.<sup>178</sup> Clifford and Fijalkowski both lay specific emphasis upon the lack of function of the goods encountered in such environments located at the fringes of commerce.

The most fascinating category of objects in these types of environment remains, today as for André Breton, the 'useless' items – useless because broken, incomplete, obsolete or unidentifiable, but also useless in the sense that they have fallen out of the technical and economic systems they were made for.<sup>179</sup>

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174 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', op. cit., p.542.

175 Krysztof Fijalkowski, 'Fantasy Goods: Surrealism and the Shopping Trip', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.9-10.

176 Ibid., p.13.

177 Ibid., p.11.

178 'The surrealists frequented the Marche aux Puces, the vast flea market of Paris, where one could rediscover the artifacts of culture, scrambled and rearranged. With luck one could bring home some bizarre or unexpected object, a work of Art with nowhere to go— 'readymades' like Marcel Duchamp's bottle rack, and *objets sauvages*, African or Oceanian sculptures. Such objects – stripped of their functional context – were necessary furnishings of the avant-garde studio.' 'On Ethnographic Surrealism', op. cit., pp.542-543.

179 'Fantasy Goods' op. cit., p.9.

*Inventory*'s own investigations into such environments focussed, not on the loss of category and classification, but rather its apotheosis – the densely researched and artificial, self-consciously banal and proletarian spaces of the high street supermarket. The text, 'Orpheus Street' *Inventory* Vol.2 No.1 1997, discussed above explores the 'sacred', or at least mythic, resonances of London's streets and the aisles of its supermarkets. 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket' revisits the supermarket, and the method of 'fierce sociology' proposing new delirious categorisations for the goods within.

Returning to the supermarket, we can see that diagonal classification need not confine itself to the name of things. One can easily imagine aisles devoted to peculiar physical attributes, foods made predominately from potato, reconstituted and reshaped foods, all the red food, the purple, the yellow. There might, for instance, be a place only for round or spherical things... Pizzas, footballs, Edam (which will also be found in the red aisle), toilet rolls (which might occur as well in a place for things that can be stood on their end so as to form towers), eggs, melons (yellow aisle), burgers, light bulbs, red cabbage (purple aisle), tubs of hand cream... Capitalism enacts sleights of hand no stranger, bullying commodities into spatial or edible categories [...].<sup>180</sup>

*Inventory* did not entirely eschew the aura of the surrealist market. A special issue, *Inventory* Vol.2 No.2, 1997, entitled 'Collected', featured numerous projects related to ephemeral and debased sites of exchange.<sup>181</sup> On such site was Holloway Road, London, which was the source for a project by Marysia Lewandowska, 'Currency' featuring images of items purchased on the street for the price of £1. *Inventory*'s own project for this issue consisted of four pages containing a defaced page from *Time Out*'s art listings; a page of classified ads listing items pertaining to 'Collecting and Hobbies' from *Loot* or *Exchange and Mart*; two images, one of a car boot sale or street market of assorted odd shoes arranged on the floor and another below of a street stall selling paintings of a type which could be typically seen in Paris in the 19th and early 20th centuries and finally a worksheet describing tasks to be carried out by library staff (belonging to *Inventory* member and editor, Adam Scrivener, who worked at SOAS library).

A later performance documented on video, *Sermon to the Objects*, compacts the slippage between religious and commodity culture. Featuring a performance intervention at a car boot

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<sup>180</sup> 'An Impossible Project: A Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket', op. cit., p.150.

<sup>181</sup> This was a special issue of *Inventory* appearing in association with the exhibition *Collected* curated by Neil Cummings at the Photographers Gallery and a number of other sites across London, 26 April – 21 June, 1997.



sale held in a parking lot, possibly at a motorway service station in an unknown location, the performance's gag, or punchline, turns on the revelation that every shitty thing produced might be considered 'one of God's creatures' through the misguided lens of a Christian zealot. On the other hand, the upending of the social order manifested by considering the lowliest, indeed second hand, commodity-thing sacred can be taken more seriously given the intense pursuit by Bataille to worship such base material. It is this oscillation, between the base and the holy – sacred and profane – which produces laughter. And, I might add, it is for the viewer/laugher a laughter which is unsure of itself – unclear whether it laughs at the pitiful objects, the 'mechanic preacher', or the rites of sacralisation and religiosity itself.

People are not stupid they know that they are being made to do things AGAINST THEIR WILL  
they may feel that something is wrong, they may feel dissatisfied, incomplete things, that  
once seemed important move away - this is our existence. all our choices were made for us/  
all others are removed to the margins. So we must search the margins, our minds, the gutter,  
the street, our imagination, for a wholly new legitimate sovereign existence.

OTHERWISE we will continue feeling guilty about our lives, when it is not we that is to  
blame .....

..... WE WILL CONTINUE TO INTERNALISE OUR MISFORTUNE [GUILT]

*Reclaim your minds + bodies - death to Capital*

### A TACTICAL SOVEREIGNTY by INVENTORY

1. What is being discussed is the everyday consumption of a proposition and nothing more.
2. If the consumer object is truly quotidian, then the idea that hosts it is equal, if not superior, to it.
3. Everyday life is only ever degraded by the system of consumption that organises it.
4. Systems exist to govern most regular human conditions and needs.
5. None of those systems are absolute. None of them amount to an atom of quality next to a good idea.
6. The idea retains sovereignty only when the relations between the host (idea/quality) and the parasite (commodity/quantity) are properly addressed.
7. The parasite cannot express itself properly without the host.
8. The host has come to depend on the parasite.
9. How does the host retain integrity after the continued mediation of the parasite?  
— By recognising that the parasite must be inhibited, indeed that its growth inhibits the free play of things and ideas. The homogenising tendencies of monopoly capitalism are like a smothering weed that must be pruned.
10. Will resistance of the parasite lead to a rejection of the host?  
— The parasite is not chimerical. It essentially needs to reinvent the representation of the commodity only, not the commodity itself, that is why it needs the host.
11. The parasite needs to regularly reappear as a novelty in order to survive. With whichever host it chooses, it does not stay for long. It is always looking for another host. Therefore any host that adapts itself too much to accommodate the parasite is either discarded or asphyxiated by this unhealthy symbiosis.
12. The key, then, to retaining sovereignty is volatility and not adaptability, rhizomic mutability rather than compatibility, a tactical sovereignty rather than an inclusive strategy. To be prepared to walk away from the parasite.
- 13 THE HOST CULTURE DOES NOT ULTIMATELY NEED THE PARASITE!

Images: (above) Scrivener, Norton, Neville and Morisa, 'The Profound Purchase', 1989 (below) Inventory, 'A Tactical Sovereignty', 2004

## NOTES ON NOTES - A MONEY MONTAGE

### Heads and Tales: Money problems again

*FACELESS BIGWIGS WHO TRAMPLE ON OUR PRIDE: The European Central Bank's decision to ban the Queen's head from euro notes is a huge own goal. At a stroke, a small bunch of unelected bankers have shown they will trample arrogantly over a nation's pride and heritage without a thought.*<sup>1</sup>

*Queen's head banned from euro notes: THE QUEEN'S portrait will not appear on euro banknotes if Britain ever joins the single currency. The European Central Bank has overruled an informal decision that the notes should have space for a 'national feature' such as the Sovereign's head, claiming that it would be inconvenient, confusing and make forgery easier. ... Mr Hague said: 'The Queen on our currency is a powerful symbol. It is a symbol of our independence and ability to make decisions in our national interest. There remains a real risk that along with this symbol we would lose our ability not only to set our own interest rates, but also the freedom to make our own tax and spending decisions.' John Redwood, the Shadow Trade Secretary, said: 'It illustrates that all the fine words about national identities remaining undiluted under a single currency were just for the birds.' He also pointed to a pre-election article in which Tony Blair had written: 'I know exactly what the British people feel when they see the Queen's head on a £10 note. I feel it too. There's a very strong emotional tie.' Mr Redwood said: 'Apparently his love for the pound was only election-deep. Tony Blair must act immediately to get this decision reversed.'*<sup>2</sup>

Image: Opening title page for Esther Leslie, 'Notes on Notes – a Money Montage', *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.2, 2001, p.28

# Sovereignty

Though Bataille's conception of 'sovereignty' was clearly determinate for *Inventory* sovereignty has diverse interpretations. Its inflection in the early-21st century tends towards the opaque. As I write this study the UK remains in upheaval. The 2016 Brexit referendum and its consequences have seemingly ripped open the steaming void on which parliamentary democracy is founded. Brexit we are told is a 'matter of sovereignty', but debates in the UK over what sovereignty might consist in – rule by elected EU representatives; rule by local UK representatives; rule by a combination of elected and unelected parliamentary figures and unelected royalty; indirect governance by the economic needs of the City of London; direct democracy? – are not only inconclusive but mostly incoherent. Crudely put, sovereignty is a mystery in the UK because its inhabitants have very little experience of it. According to Wendy Brown

a composite figure of sovereignty drawn from classical theorists [...] suggests that sovereignty's indispensable features include supremacy (no higher power), perpetuity over time (no term limits), decisionism (no boundedness by or submission to law), absoluteness and completeness (sovereignty cannot be probable or partial), nontransferability (sovereignty cannot be conferred without cancelling itself), and specified jurisdiction (territoriality).<sup>182</sup>

As Brown proposes, this is not necessarily only a local issue, with the waning of state power in the late-20th century classical theories of sovereignty do not become defunct, but rather the 'promise of sovereignty' becomes available and mobilised by extra-state actors and agencies. Sovereignty in Brown's terms is an invariant across modern history, albeit in a waning and spectral state in our present times.

Earlier, in the context of *Inventory*'s interest in the English revolution, I mentioned how the mystery of sovereignty in the UK is partially due to the dual power of Crown and Parliament. Esther Leslie's 'money montage', 'Notes on Notes', riffs on this constitutional contradiction opening with a montage of quotations expressing despair at the European Central bank's refusal to include 'the sovereign's head' on euro notes.<sup>183</sup> In the French context, Bataille understood the execution by beheading of King Louis XVI as the moment by which sovereignty was distributed across the population. For Bataille, sovereignty derived from the sovereign, but through his bodily destruction

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182 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2010, p.22.

183 Esther Leslie, 'Notes on Notes – a Money Montage', *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.2, 2001, pp.28-47 p.28.



it is distributed in an egalitarian form. For Bataille, capitalism worked to erode popular sovereignty by imposing work and necessity, but sovereignty ‘begins when, with the necessities ensured, the possibility of life opens up without limit . . . Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty.’<sup>184</sup> Bataille understood sovereignty as a historical concept, but one utterly opposed to modern utilitarianism and societies geared towards production. Bataille argued, in the post-war period, that in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the sacred had lost its link with social cohesion, in fact it began to seem even ‘anti-social’ in character.

Where it had once been the sacred – or heterogeneous – elements that had established coherence, instead of constituting society and social bonds, it could well now represent nothing else but its subversion.<sup>185</sup>

Similarly, he saw sovereignty and unproductive consumption as subversive to contemporary society. Yet, for Bataille sovereignty was not necessarily ‘kingly’, but rather, *popular*. For *Inventory*, sovereignty was not constituted in state or party forms, but was a matter of individual experience, fleeting feelings of self-possession countermanded against modern alienation. ‘[T]o navigate the world as if it were your own, for it is our own and without the messy business of formal possession.’<sup>186</sup> The city, the mundane and everyday was its crucible,

To be drunk is to be sovereign. Maybe this is the meaning of the expression ‘drunk as a lord’, or perhaps it is quite different. [...] as to whether alcohol abuse is an addiction or a disease a kind of ‘natural/cultural’ argument. I think it is neither, I would like to contend that it is an act of possession; to drink is to be possessed.<sup>187</sup>

*Inventory*’s critique of the autonomous sovereign individual at the heart of Enlightenment thought and political institutions, directed the criticism of society in towards the forms of collective life in and against society from a position of collective research – necessarily a culture and collective organ of enunciation without either a clear purpose, nor property of any one individual, patron or institution. Where towards the end of the 1990s a discourse of autonomy became more or less hegemonic on the disorganised left (mostly through a very slow and fragmented reception of elements of the Italian political movements of the 1970s), an earlier tendency on the left in the UK

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184 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share II & III*, p.198.

185 George Bataille, ‘The Moral Meaning of Sociology’, (originally published in *Critique*, 1946) in, Bataille, Georges, and Michael Richardson. 1994. *The absence of myth: writings on surrealism*. London; New York: Verso, pp.103-112, p.107.

186 Inventory, ‘Towards a Tactical Sovereignty’, in Jonathan Rabagliati (Ed.), *George Hanson Critical Forum: Eight Round-Table Discussions from the Department of Communication Art and Design at the Royal College of Art, London*, London: Department of Communication Art and Design, Royal College of Art, 2004, pp.32-37, p.33.

187 Inventory, ‘I Kingsland Passage’, *Inventory*, Vol.1, No.3, 1996, p.5.

had already criticised autonomy as in relation always to heteronomy.<sup>188</sup> Instead, probably through Bataille and the Situationist International small groups began to experiment with approaches to problems of political sovereignty, and they sought it by diversifying political debates outside of existing frameworks and developing alternative modes of knowledge production and distribution. By the 1990s monolithic media was looking obsolete and began to give way to smaller and more accessible media forms. In the UK 1990s the defeat of the workers' movement (felt tangibly in the 1986 Wapping dispute and 1984-85 Miners' strike), the break-up of the Socialist bloc and end of the cold war were widely perceived as consequences of globalisation (aggressive development of media and of energy markets). However, they also signalled a general dissolution of monolithic entities and this ushered in, or at least lent confidence to more molecular formations. Self-organisation, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, was widely championed, whether it be by think tanks promoting entrepreneurialism, or activists promoting dissenting social movements. This could take the form of journals, unorthodox public or private meetings and new technologies such as radio and the internet.<sup>189</sup> Through such movements conceptualisation of self-made and accessible sovereignty (sovereignty as the absence of authority and the unseating of habitual subjectivity) was oriented closely into the patterns of everyday life through reconceptualisation of everyday expressions such as 'drunk as a lord'; characterisation of new tendencies in culture as 'sovereign and vague' or the promotion of the experience of the city through the 'disorientation of habitual reflexes'.<sup>190</sup> In a more reflexive framework, *Inventory* proposed a 'tactical sovereignty' a concept which necessitates active criticism of capitalism: '[the idea retains sovereignty only when the relations between the host (idea/quality) and the parasite (commodity/quantity) are properly addressed.'<sup>191</sup> *Inventory's* discussions of sovereignty situates questions of political community inside struggles within the field of culture, locating there interactions with governmental, economic, mythic, theological even cosmological frameworks of sovereignty.

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188 On autonomy see Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism*. Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008. For discussions of sovereignty in this scene, see Chapter 6 of this thesis.

189 To cite two characteristic examples: in 1998 Info Centre held an event at which a version of Howard Slater's text 'Post-Media Operators' was presented via a recording as 'an imaginary address', <http://infopool.antipool.org/Stamm.htm>; In 2001 *Inventory* held a journal issue launch in the atrium of an automated bank on the fringes of the City of London.

190 Quotations respectively from, *Inventory*, 'I Kingsland Passage', *Inventory*, Vol.1, No.3, 1996, p.5; Howard Slater, 'Post-Media Operators: Sovereign and Vague', *Datacide* No.7, August 2000, <http://datacide-magazine.com/post-media-operators-%e2%80%9csovereign-vague%e2%80%9d/> and Guy-Ernest Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', *Les Lèvres Nues* No.6, 1955, available, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>

191 *Inventory*, 'Towards a Tactical Sovereignty', op. cit., p.32.

## Tragedy

Whilst *Inventory*'s references to tragedy (a Nietzschean concept which has strong resonances in the work of Bataille, but also Georg Simmel, Georgy Lukacs and Walter Benjamin) are distributed across their work in the journal and elsewhere, in this initial survey I place two key texts from the journal centrally. Robin Mackay's singular contribution to *Inventory* journal, 'Retro Retard' is an unusual intervention in the journal because circumstances around its publication and Mackay's activities with rival self-publishing group CCRU mean, with hindsight, we must understand it as an attack on the position of the journal and its editors, even if it was not initially understood in this light.<sup>192</sup> Designating a contemporary cultural phenomena it names 'pomophobia' – suggesting a position which finds postmodernism repellent – and invoking, without specifically naming, 'new tragedians', the text implies a corresponding cultural tendency: '*modern tragedy* is omnipresent in the popular postmodern', it aligns 'tragedy' with attempts to recover the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School. In what I perceive as their response to this complex, and initially obscure, attack, the editorial 'Do You Feel Crushed?', *Inventory* mobilise the work of Georg Simmel to affirm the concept of 'tragedy' positively.

Georg Simmel was a founder of sociology and one of the first philosopher's to take Nietzsche seriously. His interpretation of Nietzsche was critical, but he sought objective reasons with which to explain this dynamic of 'historical saturation' and theorised it in cultural terms as a struggle between subjective and objective elements in culture: a struggle between life and form.

We are confronted by countless objectifications of the mind: works of art, social forms, institutions, knowledge. They are like kingdoms administered according to their own laws, but they demand that we should make from them the content and norm of our own individual lives, even though we do not really know what to do with them, indeed often feel them to be a burden and an impediment.<sup>193</sup>

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192 Robin Mackay, 'Retro Retard: Pomophobia and the New Tragedians', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.30–35. Mackay subsequently published a closely related version of the same text, co-authored with Mark Fisher, rewritten to include a satire of the launch of the *Inventory* journal issue in which the text first appeared and therefore clarifying the text's initial ambiguities as a direct attack on *Inventory*. The epigraph to this second version of the text is a recognisable description of the launch event held for *Inventory* Vol.1 No.2, 1996 held at the Horse Hospital, London: 'As cutup Super-8 reels of Stalin's funeral flicker on the white walls, Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" plays on the sound system, overdubbed by blasts of spoken-word Adorno text. In another part of the room, slides of old people on holiday flick by. Cultural detritus, discovered in junk shops and church fetes, forming a jaded carnival of negative authenticity. A joyless juxtafest where "found objects" recline passively, waiting for your listless stare to turn their way.' Robin Mackay and Mark Fisher, 'Pomophobia.' *Abstract Culture*, swarm 1, 1996, available, [http://web.archive.org/web/20131115004003/http://www.ccru.net:80/swarm1/1\\_pomo.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20131115004003/http://www.ccru.net:80/swarm1/1_pomo.htm). [Accessed May 2015].

193 Georg Simmel, 'The Crisis of Culture', in Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture Selected Writings*, (Eds.) David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage, 1997, pp.90-100, p.91.



Fundamental differences between Simmel's and Nietzsche views appear in relation to their positions on fatalism and historicity. Where Nietzsche saw 'oversaturation' as something strong-willed subjects should struggle against and overcome, Simmel presents this as an unending and dynamic struggle, in some sense dialectical, or, at least, dualistic.<sup>194</sup> *Inventory*'s position is closer to the latter, which seeks to develop Simmel's critical left-Nietzscheanism, '[w]e regard nihilism in a pro-active, Nietzschean sense, as something to be worked through'.<sup>195</sup> Whilst both figures saw the outgrowth of 'objective forms' as 'hostile and dangerous to life', Nietzsche tended to view those who suffered under it as weak and feminine, characterised by 'growing effeteness'.<sup>196</sup> In the positioning of the concept of tragedy in Mackay's text we see for a second time *Inventory* positioned as feminine. In significant contrast Simmel was optimistic about the possibility of the 'alternative development of a female culture (*Weibliche Kultur*)'.<sup>197</sup> He saw the positive side of the 'struggle' between life and form, subjective and objective elements.

With each and every new form of existence which it creates for itself, its perpetual dynamism comes into conflict with the permanence or timeless validity of that form.

Sooner or later the forces of life erode every cultural form which they have produced.<sup>198</sup>

This 'struggle' is the terrain of a 'tragedy' of culture, in Simmel's formulation, one which is cited by *Inventory* in their defence and self-consciously affirmed (with a nod to Mackay's aggressive attack): 'we would actively affirm such a dynamic tension: a positive play of aggressive forces'.<sup>199</sup> This is understood as a universal dynamic but with a qualitative and quantitative historical specificity, 'a matter of quantitative vastness', developing out of the intensification of 'objective factors' in industrial modernity by which '[i]ndustries and sciences, arts and organizations impose their

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194 'the creative dynamism of life produces certain artefacts which provide it with forms of expression and actualization, and which in their turn absorb the constant flow of life, giving it form and content, scope and order: for example civil laws and constitutions, works of art, religion, science, technology and innumerable others. But a peculiar quality of these products of the life process is that from the first moment of their existence they have fixed forms of their own, set apart from the febrile rhythm of life itself, its waxing and waning, its constant renewal, its continual divisions and reunifications. [...] They have their own logic and laws, their own significance and resilience arising from a certain degree of detachment and independence vis-à-vis the spiritual dynamism which gave them life. At the moment of their establishment they are, perhaps, well-matched to life, but as life continues its evolution, they tend to become inflexible and remote from life, indeed hostile to it.' Georg Simmel, 'The Conflict in Culture' in *Simmel on Culture Selected Writings* ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage, 1997, p.76.

195 *The Nineties*, op. cit., p.31.

196 Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in Mackay, op. cit, p.31.

197 David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, 'Introduction', in *Simmel on Culture Selected Writings*, op. cit, p.2.

198 'Conflict in Culture', op. cit, p.76.

199 'Simmel perceived such tensions and paradoxes in modern culture long ago. That of the subjective spirit in danger of being subsumed by the objective spirit resulting in the tragic nihilism of metropolitan life.' 'Do You Feel Crushed?', op. cit, p.4. Cited by *Inventory* is Georg Simmel, 'The Conflict in Modern Culture', in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

content and pace of development on individuals'.<sup>200</sup> For Simmel, these were, in his own time, the indicators of a profound 'cultural crisis' and 'philosophical crisis'.<sup>201</sup> Simmel intimated a certain drive against form itself in the new movements of art, specifically expressionism, futurism and Dada. In this sense Simmel saw the contours of this cosmological struggle between life and form, the subjective and objective as already migrating into culture as a kind of anti-cultural attempt to fuse closely, in his opinion impossibly, art and life.

Mackay uses tragedy to indicate a situation characterised by entrapment and impossibility and an attitude, or orientation within it.

Irony can be coextensive with *modern tragedy* insofar as both consist in ineliminable and harsh cognizance of the terms of general economy whilst retaining an afterimage of some grand project, or its personal internalisation. They only exist as a resonance of a certain tension between half-remembered values which haunt the irradiated zones in the form of their own death, and the pulsating immanence of the general economy itself.<sup>202</sup>

The dynamic, which Mackay develops as a continuity between 'irony' and 'modern tragedy', describes a situation in which we understand the problems and limits of our agency. We aspire to 'some grand project' but cannot realise it. In this sense it is fateful. According to Mackay it is a problem evident in the 'seamless bricolage of incongruent cultural detritus' and is mobilised by an ineffectual nostalgia for 'some sort of cohesive unity'.<sup>203</sup> Ultimately, the promise of this unity, for Mackay, is false. He contends that it depends upon a Kantian framework which Mackay understands as 'regulative' and productive of rationally justified 'simulations'.<sup>204</sup>

the rent which divides modernity: between the cherished 'supersensible' realm of 'personhood', freedom, religion and world-history, and the world of synthetic cognition and science superheated by intensifying industry and economic development, lies a big gulf. The call for a structure to bridge this gulf echoes through Kantian and neo-Kantian thought, and indeed through the great political projects of modernity.<sup>205</sup>

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200 'The Crisis of Culture', op. cit, p.91-92.

201 Simmel wrote the three texts quoted above, which each construe crisis and tragedy with slightly different emphases and senses of urgency, during World War I, thus it is no wonder that such a profound sense of crisis impacted upon his writing, see 'The Crisis of Culture', op. cit, p.92

202 'Retro Retard', op. cit, p.32.

203 'Retro Retard', op. cit, p.32.

204 'Retro Retard', op. cit, p.32.

205 'Retro Retard', op. cit, p.32.

Despite its orientation towards Kant, this partition is in fact derived from Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>206</sup> Mackay aligns his critique of ‘Pomophobia’ with Lyotard’s through similarly affirmative gestures, though clothed in nihilistic style, dismissing ‘reverence of the self’, proposing ‘a machinic genealogy of post-modernity’ he urges confrontation, i.e. alignment, with the ‘thought of alien intelligence; of multiplicitous decoding and transcoding systems which use humanity as a subroutine, drowning the plaintive voice of the tragico-modern beneath the hum of ever-sophisticating machines’.<sup>207</sup> ‘Tragedy’, then demarcates the dramatic tension between life and form, or life and capital, which Mackay intends to exit by rescinding critique and affirming capital as ‘pullulating immanence’ and ‘the future’, leaving what was called human life behind.

Like Mackay, though with less ‘glee’, *Inventory* subscribe to a crisis theory of the present society.<sup>208</sup> *Inventory* attack ‘the present picture of postmodernity as an impossible web of heterogeneous fragments’.<sup>209</sup> They do not propose resuscitating the surrealist method of collage, but instead resuscitating fragments from society’s shattered image as ‘emblems’. Thus, rather than resting in alienation, accepting modern tragedy, they propose constructing ‘the social picture’ in ‘recognisable yet still complex relationships.’<sup>210</sup> They propose collective study using precisely those tools Mackay appears to abandon.

The subject will never dissolve completely, perhaps only reconfigure, displace itself , and reconfigure again into new and evermore sophisticated variations of the same dilemmas.<sup>211</sup>

This conscientious denial of the disappearance of the subject balances other statements across the journal, and in this text, which place collective effervescence and desubjectifying experiences centrally to an ‘an awareness fuelled by the utter most patience and objective rigour’.<sup>212</sup> *Inventory* subscribe to an openness to phenomena and being: ‘*Inventory* is interested in all kinds of phenomena, all variations of being. Any subject/object that is expressive of differing, complex, relationships, which make up our cruel, effervescent, banal, laughable, existence.’<sup>213</sup> While Mackay

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<sup>206</sup> Famously understood as launched by the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* but anticipated in 1974 by his attacks on critical theory and Marxism in the text, ‘Adorno as the Devil’, which in turn licenses Mackay’s association of tragedy with postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Adorno as the Devil’, *Telos*, 1974, No.19, 20 March, 1974, pp.127–37.

<sup>207</sup> ‘Retro-Retard’, op. cit, p.34 and 35.

<sup>208</sup> ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, op. cit, p.5.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p.7.

seek an exit from western epistemology through the desubjectifying experience of contemporary technology and dizzyingly obscure theoretical intertextuality, *Inventory* are both more sober and resolute in facing the arcane and archaic composite mess of their 'current constellation'.<sup>214</sup>

*Inventory* identify a continuum of Simmel's concept of 'tragedy' with 'the subjective spirit in danger of being subsumed by the objective spirit resulting in the tragic nihilism of metropolitan life.'<sup>215</sup> Bataille had radicalised this dynamic drawn from Simmel into an almost apocalyptic struggle in which the force (or even party) of life, equated with 'tragedy' and every 'monarchical authority' and 'every insurmountable barrier' which opposes it.<sup>216</sup>

*Inventory* range between these two positions, implicating a dynamic, rooted in metropolitan life which, from their perspective, has not been overcome by the onset of the postmodern condition. In 'I Want More Life Fuckers' (1999) make an impassioned (all caps) gambit to 'BREAK [...] THE TRAGIC MANACLES OF OBJECTIVE CULTURE'.<sup>217</sup> In 'Do You Feel Crushed?' the tone is less playful or desperate and more considered, the situation of tragedy is one of movement and ceaseless working through 'incompleteness' rather than overcoming.

In our post-modern moment, there are constant and repeated attempts to overcome this exhaustion, and theoretical appeals are made toward some form of philosophical or critical play. [...] Perhaps only a positive, life-affirming, nihilism seems possible or viable. One that holds life within an enthusiastic, tragic, and dynamic state of incompleteness. Until death finishes the job.<sup>218</sup>

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214 'In this present moment, our current constellation of cultural forms is sometimes presented as a sensory overload of images, expressions, signs, and ideas, too vast and complex to ever possibly assimilate. The subject feels crushed under the weight of such stimuli, buried under the excess energies of production; a glut of objects, concepts, etc. That lie, piled up upon one another, dormant or exhausted of meaning.' Ibid., p.6.

215 Ibid., p.4.

216 'On the one side a constitution of communal forces riveted to a narrow tradition – parental or racial – constitutes a monarchical authority and establishes itself as a stagnation and as an unsurmountable barrier to life; on the other, a bond of fraternity, which may be foreign to the bond of blood, is established between men, who among themselves decide upon the necessary consecrations: and the goal of their meeting is not a clearly defined action, but life itself – LIFE, IN OTHER WORDS. TRAGEDY.' Georges Bataille, 'Nietzschean Chronicle', op. cit., p.205. A comparison between phrasing and typography of this text and 'I Want More Life Fuckers' would be illuminating. 'Inventory, 'I Want More Life Fuckers', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2, 1999, pp.4–7.

217 'I Want More Life Fuckers', p.4.

218 'Do You Feel Crushed?', op. cit, p.6.

A positive or active nihilism does not only revel in the destruction of old values but seeks to generate new meaning.<sup>219</sup> This, as we shall see, is in continuity with Benjamin's account of the way in which destruction makes possible new experience.

## A Constellation of Methods

The intention of this study is to understand how *Inventory* proposed their project as a kind of 'paper assembly'. In this sense the journal can be considered a kind of democratic political space in which 'speech acts' could occur; a collage or construction involving heterogeneous or individual elements; a construction from out of paper: i.e. ephemeral and perishable, elements. In light of the discussion of 'fierce' and 'surrealist sociology' above, itself a kind of disciplinary collage, and with regards to the forthcoming discussion of Benjamin's method, this hopefully already provides a few images with which to consider something like a methodology for *Inventory* as a journal. If *Inventory* have a method at all it is fragile, and open to accidental conjuncture with its target objects. At the beginning of their editorial, 'Do You Feel Crushed?', *Inventory* state clearly that 'We have little in the way of method in fact what little it is leads to paradox and contradiction.'<sup>220</sup> A little further on, they state: '[t]hus, we wish to employ an emblematics, a critical heterology, whereby form and formlessness, image and text are linked in a methodology which is at once historical, anthropological and poetic'.<sup>221</sup> In short order we encounter both a denial of method and an actual sketch of a methodology, one which as I have shown here consists in some rich substance in historical debates. I contend that what *Inventory* staged, and I have reconstructed here, is a tension between method and no method. This is the negation of method per se, its characterisation as paradox and contradiction, and the proposition of a methodology which is flexible, premised on the heterogeneity of phenomena. And lastly the contradiction between method and no method as an operative ground for the investigation, not assuming, but 'seeking' what will subsequently be described as a 'bewitched spot'.

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219 This is position of 'active nihilism', with reference to Nietzsche, is again reiterated by *Inventory*'s editors, and here explicitly brought into articulation with reference to *Inventory*'s transformation of anthropological field work, in an interview: 'We regard nihilism in a pro-active, Nietzschean sense, as something to be worked through, and empowered by. By investigating the nature of field work, we turn the anthropological gaze back on ourselves. This could be translated into politics – through the surrealist notion of a permanent state of revolution.' Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, London: Flamingo, 2000, p.31.

220 'Do You Feel Crushed?', op. cit, p.4.

221 Ibid., p.5.

# **Chapter 4**

**That Bewitched Spot:**

**Inventory, Georges Bataille  
and Walter Benjamin**

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# Introduction

This chapter looks primarily at the way the work of Walter Benjamin informed the journal *Inventory*. Pursuing comparison of Bataille and Benjamin will allow the ongoing development of an understanding of *Inventory*'s relation to a series of themes and methods opened up as being of importance in the last chapter through the examination of their relation to Bataille: issues around ethnographic or sociological practices, the pursuit of 'factuality' or 'facticity' as a means of inquiry the role of myth, magic and the sacred in tension with science, etc. it also investigates questions of the journal's relations to idealism and materialism, between the particular and the totality, and *Inventory*'s interest in 'theory' and 'philosophy', which in turn condition their particular attitude to and employment of 'ethnographic' practice.

## Benjamin and Bataille's Elective Affinities

In this chapter I argue that *Inventory*'s exploration of Benjamin's method and its problems complemented and modified the 'sacred sociology' derived from Bataille and the complex lineage of surrealists and ethnographers in his sphere of influence. Just as in Chapter 2 I differentiated between the canonical Anglophone reception of Bataille as a transgressive Sadean figure, and *Inventory*'s own more politicised, sociological and (anti-)philosophical reading, here I shall also argue that *Inventory*'s reception of Benjamin's work activated a heterodox and non-academic reading which was oriented to their invention of a praxis of writing and publishing.

The specifically philosophical, or anti-philosophical, Benjamin has been a late emergence in critical reception of his work and has contended antagonistically with a vague, dehistoricised and de-politicised use of his work within Anglophone cultural studies, an enterprise to which *Inventory* vocally opposed themselves.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin was an appealing figure to *Inventory* because he was an

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1 Chiefly I am referring here to accounts which tend to emphasise Benjamin as a commentator upon, rather than critic of, consumerism and popular culture and as a prototypical interdisciplinary writer-researcher. These accounts often rely heavily upon Benjamin's 'Artwork essay' which is rather exceptionally affirmative (of technological media) and historically overdetermined in his oeuvre, and de-emphasise his engagement with philosophy, aesthetics and Marxism. An example of this approach would be Angela McRobbie, 'The Passagenwerk and the Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies: Benjamin, Cultural Studies, Marxist Theories of Art', in *Cultural Studies* Vol.6,

outsider, having never fully achieved an academic role, he survived materially through freelance writing, translating and bookselling.<sup>2</sup> Whilst Benjamin's maverick and outsider status is unquestionable, his association with both The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and the College of Sociology opened him to, arguably counter-institutional, collaborative research work of the kind *Inventory* also pursued.<sup>3</sup> I briefly lay out the concrete connections between Bataille and Benjamin through their encounters in Paris in order to establish initial lines of agreement and disagreement between the pair.

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No.2,1992): pp.47–69. Republished in Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994. A strong critique of McRobbie's position is represented by Esther Leslie, 'Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades', in Beatrice Hanssen (Ed.) *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*. London; New York: Continuum, 2006. This is a complex situation to unpick in detail and I shall be unable to give a full account here. But, as shall repeatedly be made clear, *Inventory* assumed a partisan position against art even culture. Their fiercely original interpretation of Benjamin was characterised by a highly critical approach to consumerism and a general tendency towards critique rather than commentary. *Inventory*'s own standpoint on 'cultural studies' seems rather one of early identification followed by disappointment, best represented by the retrospective evaluation of their own 'anti-project in 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs': 'the world of mainstream magazine publishing who, in their persistent doltish enslavement to fashion, have appropriated (and contributed to) the widespread depoliticisation of the discipline of Cultural Studies.' *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, fn.3, p.13.

- 2 Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*, London: Reaktion Books, 2008, (on Benjamin's academic failures) p.67, (on Benjamin's book collecting and bookselling) p.103 and p.138.
- 3 Michael Weingrad details the work undertaken by Benjamin in Paris on behalf of the Institut für Sozialforschung, notably some of this work involved assessing the possible commonalities and room for collaboration between Caillouis, Klossowski, Georges Bataille's projects and those of the Institute. Michael Weingrad, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research', *New German Critique*, no. 84,2001, pp.129–61. The *Passagen-Werk* was itself one of the 'sponsored research projects' of the Institut für Sozialforschung, Rolf Tiedemann, "'Dialectics at a Standstill" Approaches to the Passagen-Werk', (Trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere) in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999, pp.929-945, p.930. Further resemblances might be gleaned from close study of the fluidity of social roles through which figures from Bataille's circle moved and those of *Inventory*'s editors and regular contributors (what I have named as *Inventory*'s first and second editorial group). Michel Leiris moved from surrealism, to ethnography (his 'second profession'), back to surrealism and into literature again, to finally be canonised as an innovative ethnographer and writer. Roger Caillouis worked as an academic researcher, but also found funding for journal projects from the French Communist Party (PCF). Bataille worked as a librarian, as a journal editor, then as an editor for publishers. Georges Bataille and Benjamin met frequently at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris where Benjamin read and Bataille worked as a librarian, Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*, op. cit. p.188.



Image: Cover of Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* / *One-Way Street*, designed by Sasha Stone for Ernst Rowohlt Verlag, 1928

Benjamin and Bataille inhabited late-30s Paris at dynamic moment of revolutionary ferment, the rise of fascism, growing threat of war and popular anarchist (Spain) and communist movements. Benjamin met Bataille in his capacity of librarian at the Bibliotheque Nationale and it was eventually to Bataille whom he entrusted his writings, which Bataille hid in the library, before attempting to flee unsuccessfully across the Pyrenees to Spain in 1940. Walter Benjamin, who had also attended meetings of Contre-Attaque (1935–36), debated the partisans of *Acephale* (1936–1939), attended lectures and prepared to present his own at the College of Sociology (1937–39).<sup>4</sup> Benjamin's own paper projects, journals which mostly never came about, set as their aims explorations of the possibilities and impossibilities of elective communities.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Benjamin, like Bataille and Caillois, was convinced of the persistence of myth in modernity, interested in esoteric themes and elective communities, he understood the potential for such constellations in the 20th century less in terms of a revival of archaic forms than in the return of repressed human capacities through the apertures blasted open by new technological assemblages.<sup>6</sup> In a series of late interviews, Pierre Klossowski discussed the fascination and antagonism between Benjamin and Bataille. Highlighting Benjamin's criticism of *Acephale*, he gives a compelling account of his Benjamin's Fourierist vision of a future society.<sup>7</sup>

Having the means of production in common would permit substituting for the abolished social classes a redistribution of society into affective classes. A freed industrial production, instead of mastering affectivity, would expand its forms and organize its exchanges, in the sense that work would be in collusion with lust, and cease to be the other, punitive, side of the coin.<sup>8</sup>

After the expanded and pluralistic coalition of Contre-Attaque, the formation of the secret group *Acephale* seemed to Benjamin a turn away from Marxism, towards a kind of archaism and esoteric

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4 *The College of Sociology*, op. cit. p.219 and p.262 and p.389

5 Benjamin's journal projects are hardly comparable with those of Bataille, since not one, like many of his writings, saw publication. However, even in their absence they are notable in their ignition of shared themes of early romantic philosophy, critique, crisis and community. An excellent account of Benjamin's journals is provided by Emmanuel Alloa, of which I provide an annotated summary in Appendices: Benjamin's Journals, see also Emmanuel Alloa, 'The Inorganic Community: Hypotheses on Literary Communism in Novalis, Benjamin, and Blanchot', *Boundary 2*, vol.39, no.3, 1 August 2012, pp.75–95.

6 Michael Weingrad, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research', *New German Critique*, no. 84 (2001), pp.129–61, pp.130–133.

7 Pierre Klossowski, a member of Contre-Attaque, the College of Sociology, *Acephale* and contributor to the journal *Acephale* was Benjamin's French translator in Paris during the late-1930s

8 Pierre Klossowski, 'Entre Marx et Fourier', Denis Hollier (Ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp.388–389, p.389. Originally published in Pierre Klossowski, 'Entre Marx et Fourier', *Le Monde*, 31 May, 1969, supplement to No.7582 (special page devoted to Walter Benjamin).

isolation he named ‘prefascist aestheticism’.<sup>9</sup> Klossowski subsequently drew clear lines between Benjamin’s Fourierist “‘phalansterian” revival’ and the dialectical oscillation of this loose group between esoteric and exoteric or open and closed forms of group inquiry, to which Benjamin remained primarily an outsider.<sup>10</sup>

Attempting to critically recover surrealism in the post-war period Bataille borrowed from Maurice Nadeau a characterisation which specifies the quality of collectivity he understood to operate within such surrealist groupuscules.

This movement [...] was not an association of men of letters patting each other on the back to insure their success; nor even a school with various theoretical ideas in common, but a collective organisation, a set of initiates, a *Bund* subject to collective initiatives, whose members were linked by a common discipline. One entered it with one’s eyes wide open; one left or was excluded by it for specific reasons.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin’s participation in the College, and interest in such groupings through his research into fascism and romanticism suggests shared themes but strained personal relations with Bataille. Benjamin was a marginal and somewhat suspicious outsider rather than a full initiate of these circles. Denis Hollier, whose own efforts brought the College of Sociology into appearance for a wider public for the first time, emphasises the discordance within a closed-circuit of a deeply ambiguous nature.

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9 Ibid., p.389. Yet, as Klossowski points out, certain elements of the group were misunderstood by Benjamin. ‘There was no possible agreement about this point of his analysis, whose presuppositions did not coincide at all with the basic ideas and past history of the groups formed successively by Breton and Bataille, especially Acéphale.’ Ibid. We can attribute this to his ignorance, perhaps, of the history of militancy in France and the different temporalities at work in Germany and France. Despite witnessing the bleak conditions for critical cultural and political activity in Moscow for himself in 1927, in 1934 Benjamin seemed to be clinging to the possibility of a renewed productivism oriented by the Soviet Union. A position from which we can see *Inventory*’s distance through their own comments on ‘state capitalism’ in the ‘Profound Purchase’, and which would have seemed either naive, cynical or strangely opportunistic to Bataille’s circle who had this point clearly rejected Stalinism, Bolsheviks and the French Communist Party. Benjamin visited Moscow between 1927 and 1928 see Walter Benjamin, ‘Moscow Diary’, *October*, Vol. 35, (Winter, 1985), pp.9-135. Benjamin’s text ‘The Author as Producer’ represents his most conservative effort to forge an alliance between experimental and ‘committed’ art. The text was presented at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris 27 April 1934, only two months after the February riots. The context of Benjamin’s championing of an approach to art already long dead in the Soviet Union, is obscure, though at this point Benjamin must have been hopeful that the new orientation by Moscow towards a popular front in Europe represents something of a positive opportunity for a renewed progressive political aesthetics and was perhaps hedging his bets.

10 For a definitive account of Benjamin’s relation to the College see Michael Weingrad, ‘The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research’, *New German Critique*, no. 84, 2001, pp.129–61.

11 Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, (Trans. Richard Joseph Howard), Jonathan Cape: London, 1968, p.104 quoted in Bataille, Georges. ‘Surrealism and How it Differs from Existentialism’, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, Ed. and trans. Michael Richardson. London; New York: Verso, 1994, p.58.

The College of Sociology (1937-1939) did not last, nor can it be summed up – except as a chorus that is not in unison, the soloists too numerous and their voices too distinct, without unanimity. It had no first person. And, with very few exceptions, it is absent from literature (or sociology) manuals. Black holes elude the surveyor's radar, and the College, too dense for detection, does not show up on maps.<sup>12</sup>

Though Benjamin Noys and others have stressed the elements of such groups that were community constructing, their deconstructive logic must also be held in view.<sup>13</sup> Bataille wrote that '[i]t was André Breton who rightly recognized that a poet or a painter does not have the power to say what is in his heart, but that an organisation or collective body could.'<sup>14</sup> Here a motivation for the kinds of collective work found amongst surrealist groups and reanimated in *Inventory* journal is both expressive and epistemological: individual efforts may not express more than solipsism but their aggregation into a collective ensemble might draw close to truth. Yet there are ambiguities: whether this expressly forbade individual expression seems unlikely since the strength of surrealism's projects and *Inventory*'s publishing practice equally depended on individual and singular contributions. Yet the reasons for the privileging of collective expression over individual is unclear, why is collective expression more truthful or powerful? Paul Claydon argues, following Benjamin and on *Inventory*'s behalf,

The material formulation of collective consciousness [the law of value as refracted in a libidinal economy] that invades every level of capitalist society [...] is essentially sociological and not spiritual, to condemn the collective to the idea that it conceals a genealogical shared characteristic is to condemn it to the fated hand of history. It offers no chance for transformation, and only the melancholy prospect of eternal 're-realisation' with each passing generation.<sup>15</sup>

What emerges from this chapter is the close homology between the formal means of *Inventory*'s sociology of collective inquiry: the journal, essay and glossary, and the collective enterprise itself as an *attempt*, essay or experiment. The question of autonomous or individual artworks raises itself in what follows primarily only negatively, but as far as art's negativity vis-a-vis society can be a

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12 Denis Hollier, 'Foreword' to *The College of Sociology*, op. cit., p.x.

13 Ibid., Cf. FN#108.

14 'Surrealism and How it Differs from Existentialism', op. cit., p.60.

15 Paul Claydon, "'Botanizing on the Asphalt': Walter Benjamin and the City', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.36-65, pp.47-48.

critical force it is ever present and is arguably smuggled in these discussions primarily as a ‘secret cargo’.<sup>16</sup> In the sections which follow this question finds some complex answers, these relate to the complex configurations of subject and object in capitalist society, in understandings of commodity and commodification, in empirical research, ethnography and in aesthetic experimentation.

*Inventory*’s project incorporated not only Benjamin’s theoretical system, but that of his close friend, ally and correspondent Theodor W. Adorno: through discussion of the essay as a form and through a significant debate on their common endeavour to renew methods of materialist research. This chapter therefore reconstructs an important methodological discussion between Theodor. W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, examined in detail in an essay by *Inventory* editor, Paul Claydon, “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’: Walter Benjamin and the City’ (1996) then cited in an important methodological statement by the editorial group, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’ (1998); and later discussed again extensively in their late work, *The Counsel of Spent* (2018).<sup>17</sup> As a central component in this chapter I seek to illuminate the stakes of this debate for the group and how it impacted on the journal’s practice.

## Benjamin’s Moscow Diary and the Origin of *Inventory*’s Title

The origin of *Inventory*’s title is provided in the very first programmatic statement, or editorial, opening the first issue of the journal: ‘For a Sociology’.<sup>18</sup> The text begins with this short epigram by Walter Benjamin:

The inventory of the streets is inexhaustible.<sup>19</sup>

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16 “‘art for art’s sake” was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name.’ Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1*, (Eds.) Michael W Jennings and Howard Eiland, (Trans. Gary Smith and Rodney Livingstone), Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2005.

17 *Inventory*, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8; Paul Claydon, “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’: Walter Benjamin and the City’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.36-65 and *Inventory*, *The Counsel of Spent*, London: Book Works, 2018, specifically pp.55–57.

18 *Inventory*, ‘For a Sociology’, op. cit, pp.4-5.

19 Walter Benjamin, ‘Moscow Diary’, op. cit., p.58. Walter Benjamin, ‘Moscow Diary’, p.58, quoted in *Inventory*, ‘For a Sociology’, ibid. A full transcript of the ‘Moscow Diary’ appeared in *October*, Vol. 35, Winter, 1985, pp.9-135.



The sentence is drawn from the ‘Moscow Diary’, a manuscript published posthumously upon which Benjamin drew for series of written reflections on the city published in various journals in 1927.<sup>20</sup> From it, the quotation *Inventory* borrowed provides a key element which the journal developed and inflected through its own grammar. The choice of ‘Inventory’ as a title has a number of significances which I began to sketch in Chapter 1 but shall here develop further in literary, political and philosophical registers. The choice of title relates directly to the *method* the journal adopted and developed through its activities. To the selection of this title from Benjamin’s text can be attributed further methodological significances, because, as I shall argue here, the ‘Diary’ was a highly charged opportunity for Benjamin to bring together his political and cultural interests in a new mode of writing, the methodological development of which has a close relation to other studies, both completed and incomplete.

The passage in which Benjamin deploys the term and from which *Inventory* made the epigram does not at first provide much with which to interpret this choice or nomination. We can discern that Benjamin, in his study of post-revolutionary Moscow, intended to privilege the experience of the street, and this is an axiom through which *Inventory* journal would pursue in their research and publishing venture, ‘attune to the sound of the street’.<sup>21</sup>

The history of the word ‘magazine’ can be related directly to the storage of goods.<sup>22</sup> This meaning provides the editors of *Inventory* a premise with which to describe the magazine as an ‘anti-hierarchical catalogue’<sup>23</sup> – a temporary and intermittent collection – or, as Gwen Allen writes, ‘a container for an eclectic array of contents’.<sup>24</sup> These linguistic allusions establish the question of the commodity as central to the function of the store and its written record.<sup>25</sup> *Inventory* is inexhaustible,

20 For English readers the best known of these is the city study entitled ‘Moscow’, originally published in instalments in the French left newspaper *L’Humanité* during 1927, anthologised in English in both *One-Way Street*, London: Verso, 2006 (1979), pp.177–208 and *Reflections*, New York: Random House, 2007 (1978). Benjamin produced a number of works published in German and French from the trip, these are given in a footnote to the republication of ‘Moscow Diary’ in *October*, Ibid.

21 *Inventory*, ‘Sounds of the Street’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.142–143, p.143.

22 The French absorption of this term contributed distinctly military meanings to it, as in: ‘1: a storehouse or warehouse especially for military supplies 2: a place for keeping explosives in a fort or ship 3: a publication containing different pieces (as stories, articles, or poems) and issued at regular intervals (as weekly or monthly) 4: a supply chamber: as a: a container in a gun for holding cartridges b: a container for film on a camera or motion-picture projector.’ <http://www.wordcentral.com/cgi-bin/student?magazine>

23 *Inventory* quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.34.

24 Gwen Allen, ‘Introduction’, Gwen Allen, (Ed.), *The Magazine*. London; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery: The MIT Press, 2016.

25 Indeed as Henri Lefebvre writes in the epigraph to this study, ‘The commodity hides in stores, in warehouses – in inventory. Yet it has no mystery comparable to the mystery of nature. The enigma of the commodity is entirely social. [...] The commodity asks for nothing better than to appear. And appear it does – visible/readable, in shop windows and on display racks. Self-exhibition is its forte.’ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford, OX,

does this mean the journal itself is indefatigable? Or that the journal attempts to be exhaustive but its object is inexhaustible? Are both the streets and the descriptions of the streets excessive? What is the inventory: *things*, or the *words* for them? First, I will attempt to understand Benjamin's use of the term throughout his texts in order to subsequently develop its wider significance for the journal.

## A Grand Inventory of Human and Territorial Wealth

Benjamin uses the term 'inventory' three times in 'Moscow Diary'. The third instance, from which *Inventory's* epigraph is drawn proves the least clear and most arcane. It is situated in the midst of a series of reflections on the floral, culinary and sartorial arts evident in the Moscow streets.<sup>26</sup> The sequentially first use of the term 'inventory' in the 'Diary' makes clear the limitations to trade during this period in Russia, yet Benjamin's description luxuriates in even the most modest display of objects.<sup>27</sup>

Benjamin's second use of the term *inventory* refers to the practical protection of property of the hotel where he lodges: 'Every piece of furniture in it bears a tin tag with the words Moscow Hotels and then the inventory number. Hotels are collectively administered by the state (or the city?).'<sup>28</sup> The published essay, *Moscow*, for which the diary was a preparatory study, focusses relentlessly on forms of ownership and utility in the city. In it Benjamin refers to the 'scanty inventory' of typical rooms, which contain 'only a residue of petty-bourgeois possessions'.<sup>29</sup> He contrasts the sparsity, with the 'completeness' of the typical bourgeois interior; however this in turn is contrasted to the plenitude of 'life' after the Bolsheviks have abolished its 'private' aspect.<sup>30</sup> The use of 'inventory' is then also applied by Benjamin to describe an imaginary survey taking place after the abolition of private property, in which what is evaluated is 'human and territorial wealth'. The administration of things is hereby linked to the system and to its capacity to encompass totality, in the sense of a complete catalogue or classification system of the stuff or wealth of its world.

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UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991, p.340.

26 'Moscow Diary', op. cit., p.58.

27 'One often comes across cordons in front of the state stores: one stands in line for butter and other important staples. There are countless shops and even more merchants whose entire *inventory* consists of little more than a washbasket of apples, tangerines, or peanuts. In order to protect their produce from the cold, they place it under woollen blankets on top of which two or three specimen items are displayed.' 'Moscow Diary', op. cit., p.18. My emphasis.

28 Ibid., p.41.

29 Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London: New Left Books, 1979, pp.1188.

30 Ibid.

*Art | Theory | Criticism | Politics*

# OCTOBER 35

## MOSCOW DIARY

*by Walter Benjamin*

*preface by Gershom Scholem  
translated by Richard Sieburth  
edited by Gary Smith*

\$6.00/Winter 1985

*Published by the MIT Press*

Image: Special Issue on Walter Benjamin's Moscow Diary, *October*, No.35, Winter 1985

Russia was the possession of the tsar (indeed, anyone walking past the endlessly piled-up valuables in the Kremlin collections is tempted to say, 'a possession'). The people, however, have become overnight his immeasurably wealthy heirs. *They now set about drawing up a grand inventory of their human and territorial wealth.* And they undertake this work in the consciousness of having already performed unimaginably difficult tasks, and built up, against the hostility of half the world, the new system of power. [...] It is this reversal of the power structure that makes life here so heavy with content.<sup>31</sup>

In post-revolutionary Russia the emptiness of its domestic interiors is contrasted with a 'life [...] heavy with content'. Because the arrangement of wealth has changed, wealth itself, now owned in common, has changed its meaning perhaps even its materiality. As interpreted in Esther Leslie's essay for *Inventory* on money,

For the Soviet people, wealth, genuine wealth does not come in the form of money, coins or paper notes, but is human, territorial, and connected to the ability to make decisions. This sense of wealth as activity, engagement, social power is what makes life in Russia so heavy with content, so full of events and prospects. 'From early till late people dig for power.' Self-activity. engagement is the watchword.<sup>32</sup>

In Benjamin's words '[t]he inventory of the streets is inexhaustible.' and the 'inventory of their human and territorial wealth' is 'grand'. Of direct interest to *Inventory*'s 'paper assembly', in partially decommmodified Moscow, paper takes on a heightened significance, 'paper continues to play a major role in business transactions', 'wall newspapers' appear as 'schemata of [a] collective form of expression' and the newspaper becomes 'the chronicle of the collective'.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to the privation capitalism enforces with its law, police and markets, Benjamin sees life full of potential. Karl Marx, in his early writings, theorised the negative relationship between private property and communism, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, distinguishing between 'the life of private property' and another implied, as yet unrealised, form of human wealth.

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when

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31 Ibid., p.195.

32 Esther Leslie, 'Notes on Notes', *Inventory*, Vol. 4 No.2, 2001, pp.28-47, p.40, quoting Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow' in *One-Way Street*, op. cit., p.195.

33 *One-Way Street*, op. cit., p.194 and p.200.

we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., – in short, when it is *used* by us. Although private property itself again conceives all these direct realisations of possession only as *means of life*, and the life which they serve as means is the *life of private property* – labour and conversion into capital.<sup>34</sup>

For Marx, ‘The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’, it is against this vision of wealth which I believe Benjamin posed his ‘grand inventory’.<sup>35</sup> This view of the ‘poverty’ of property, versus (under communism, potentially) the wealth of human experience is supported, by a late collectively authored (as Inventory) text on ‘Death’ published in *Inventory* .

Supposing we were to make an inventory of everything we owned, all our possessions. What could this accumulated data say to us? – Nothing more than the extreme poverty of modern life. For all our constructions, our technologies, our material cultures attempt to mask our corporeal existence – our true materiality.<sup>36</sup>

This perhaps sounds counter-intuitive, since I am proposing, and have throughout this study, that *Inventory* journal is precisely an (open and deliberately incomplete) encyclopedic survey of the totality of human ‘wealth’. Here, clarified, are *Inventory*’s editors distinction between the boundaries of that *Inventory* – not mere stuff, things, property: rather the totality consists in ‘ensembles’, ‘things’ not contained by proprietary relations, instead what these things point towards and a track is the combinations of human corporeality and experience which are its true contents and objects of study.<sup>37</sup>

Benjamin visit to Moscow took place between late-1926 and early-1927, therefore directly after a breach – the Russian Revolution and the ensuing civil war – and, as Leslie notes, in the midst of an ongoing reconstruction of market relations inaugurated by Lenin’s proclamation of the New Economic Plan (NEP) in 1921.<sup>38</sup> Many have studied these texts searching for political intrigue, but

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34 Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)’, in *Early writings*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton. Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin in association with New Left Review, 1992, pp.351–352.

35 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.I*, (Trans Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach) London: Penguin, 1990, p.125.

36 Inventory, ‘Death’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.138–141, p.139.

37 *Inventory* stated that they were ‘interested’ in ‘[a]ll forms of communities, ensembles of data, clusters which encircle around a myriad of principles; of thoughts and feelings, which find themselves coagulating, forming knots and drifts’ ‘Do You Feel Crushed’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8.

38 The NEP continued 1921-1928. V. N. Bandera, ‘New Economic Policy (NEP) as an Economic Policy’, *The Journal of Political Economy* Vol.71, No.3, 1963.

other areas we might draw political implications from is the fine-grained and encyclopaedic material analysis of everyday life, consumption habits and social behaviour which was actually Benjamin's professed focus.<sup>39</sup> The Diary is, as Gary Smith notes, between an 'encyclopedic survey [and] a personal memoir', it is 'encyclopedic' in its attention to words and things.<sup>40</sup> Benjamin was highly equivocal about his trip and what he saw in Moscow, and this seems to have effected his approach to the writing he had been posted there to carry out. Whilst constructivist, futurist and productivist movements celebrated the new, technological, and industrial in an affirmative light, many Russian avant-garde novels of the 1920s are instead tinged with both a nostalgic sense of what might be lost, but also often something more primordial, archaic, disturbing and, even, entropic and Benjamin seems to have been attune to this tendency.<sup>41</sup>

In a letter to Martin Buber, who provided Benjamin the funds needed for his trip by commissioning from him an essay on Moscow for the journal *Die Kreatur*, Benjamin explained that his article 'will be devoid of all theory.'<sup>42</sup> He continues, 'In this fashion I hope to succeed in allowing the "creatural" to speak for itself'. This cryptic term 'creatural' (a play on the title of Buber's journal), obviously prompts us to assume some form of anthropology.<sup>43</sup> Sami Khatib proposed we read this as a composite post-human term, formed by Benjamin from an assembly of sources theological and science fictional:

The creature denotes a post-humanist state of being devoid of all idealist notions of humanity like creativity, organic wholeness, and contemplative thinking. In other words:

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39 Many commentators have found the political significance of this text in its documentation of the increasing pressure being brought to bear on the 'left opposition' in Russia – a political grouping consisting of participants in the Russian revolution, who, with Stalin's ascendancy, were soon to be marginalised, flee or be arrested and tried. See e.g. Gary Smith, 'Afterword', *October* No.35, op. cit..

40 Before his trip Benjamin had been invited to write an article on Goethe for the *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia* (Great Soviet Encyclopedia), though this commission failed spectacularly the *Encyclopedia* must have haunted Benjamin's trip as a heroic parallel to his own more humble study, see Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow Diary', op. cit., pp.9-135. p.14, p.39, p.81 and pp.130–131. A focus on *things* was of central interest to the artistic avant-gardes and some Marxian theorists in the 1920s. Two excellent examples of this tendency are Boris Arvatov, 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)', (Trans. Christina Kiaer), in *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer, 1997) which, through a radically syncretic combination of constructivist, productivist and formalist aesthetic principles arrives at a transgressive proposition for the overcoming of the objects reduction to capitalist use and exchange values and Isaak Illich Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, Trans. Miloš Samardžija & Freddy Perlman, Delhi: Aakar Press, 2008 which arrives at a critique of the socialist consensus of the neutrality of use value through a close study of Marx's writings.

41 In their efforts to combine progressive communist values and a certain nostalgia for the rapidly disappearing traces of the past by grasping the dependence of these transformations upon new technical objects and object relations, several writers of this period sought to allegorise and narrate this dynamic period through materials, objects and emotions-as-things themselves. Notable examples are Zevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, (1921), Gladkov, *Cement* (1925), Yuri Olesha, *Envy* (1927), Boris Pilnyak, *The Naked Year* (1922) and *Mahogany*, (1928), Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur* and *The Foundation Pit*, (1926 and 1930).

42 Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Martin Buber February 23, 1927', *October* No.35, 1985, p.132.

43 Ibid.

it marks the zero level, the most deprived mode of human existence surviving the age of capitalist modernity.<sup>44</sup>

According to Khatib's the 'Diary' and thus the role of 'inventorising' within it is to report from a new post-revolutionary society upon the new type of human being that might emerge. Benjamin insisted that we must remain open-minded about what might emerge, trusting that the details of everyday life would provide a legibility that the political process, by this point, had lost.

An interest in the 'creaturely' can be discerned in *Inventory*'s technique of levelling animal and human styles of inhabitation for the purposes of cross-cultural comparison (in for example 'Oracular Architecture'), but also in their revival of the Ranter habit of addressing political allies and friends as 'fellow creatures'.<sup>45</sup> In these areas, and in many other texts with post-humanist leanings published in the journal, there is a sense, shared with Benjamin, that human animal needs (for shelter, intimacy, connection) are those most neglected by the complex machinations of late-modernity, and that these should be restored to the centre of our concerns and made central to the pursuit of knowledge.

Benjamin situated his study inside an experience of disorientation, which is linguistic as well as emotional and temporal.<sup>46</sup> He describes a conscious conceit to reject theory in these studies, writing: 'I want to write a description of Moscow at the present moment in which "all factuality is already theory" and which would thereby refrain from any deductive abstraction, from any prognostication, and even within certain limits, from any judgment'.<sup>47</sup> It is in this light that we may read Benjamin's study as a form of inventorising post-revolutionary life in Russia from the perspective of an outside observer whose description is not neutral but committed to recording the look and feel of everyday life, material life and economic facts, in their appearance ('physiognomy'<sup>48</sup> or 'the mask of an

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44 Though here perhaps Khatib drives an analogy with Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life rather too far, the reading is nonetheless illuminating. Sami Khatib, 'To Win the Energies of Intoxication for the Revolution', *Anthropology & Materialism* [Online], No.2 April, 2014, <http://am.revues.org/348>, [Accessed 13 February 2016] p.7.

45 Paul Claydon, 'Oracular Architecture', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.95-113. *Inventory*'s editors addressed their contributors as 'fellow creatures' in a flyer inviting them to a private party. Christopher Hill writes of the Ranters that, 'their salutation of "fellow creature" [was] intended to emphasize unity, with man and with the whole creation. ('Fellow creature' was a phrase of Winstanley's. Abiezer Coppe and Joseph Salmon, like Winstanley, had a vision of this unity of all created things.' Hill, Christopher. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*. London...[etc.: Penguin books, 1991, p.206.

46 'inasmuch as I have succeeded in seizing and rendering this very new and disorienting language that echoes loudly through the resounding mask of an environment that has been totally transformed.' Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Martin Buber February 23, 1927', op. cit.

47Ibid.

48 'I have attempted to convey an image of proletarian Moscow that one can come to know only when one has witnessed it under ice and snow, and above all I have tried to render the physiognomy of its workday and the new



environment'<sup>49</sup>) whilst they undergo a process of extraordinary transformation. Benjamin's method derives from both an enthusiasm for the social potential of this transformation, and an extreme reserve about the power of the Bolshevik party and State over it. The method therefore adopts an optimism towards the facticity of material life, already suggested in Benjamin's programmatic statement for his journal – 'to cognize by immersing itself in the object' – but making clear in that presentation that they are far from transparent to analysis, it is a question of presenting this 'mask' of an environment's appearance in its resonances.<sup>50</sup> The west was abound with theories of Soviet Russia emanating from both left and right, but Benjamin's insistence on attention to its objects, peoples and words brackets off theory in a way that dislocates its ordering governance of them.<sup>51</sup> As Marx wrote, 'The abolition [*Aufhebung*] of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation of all human senses and qualities*.'<sup>52</sup> This was not only an ethical matter of the primacy of experience evident in all of Benjamin's writings, but also obviously a practical matter for him, more direct political insights may have made his trip and his life after it difficult, or even impossible.

Benjamin's difficulties, his troubling of objectivity and theory, was transformed, I argue, by *Inventory*, into set of fundamentally methodological questions which brought heteronomous forms of writing and notions of practice into close dialogue with their method.<sup>53</sup> One of the reasons the

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rhythm that informs both the life of the worker and that of the intellectual.' Walter Benjamin, 'Preface to a planned series for *Humanité*, May 1, 1927', *October* No.35, 1985, p.134.

49 Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Martin Buber February 23, 1927', op. cit.

50 Quotations from Walter Benjamin, 'Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*' (Written in 1922; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime) *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume-1, 1913-1926*, Michael W Jennings (Eds.), (Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Marcus Bullock), Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, pp.292-296. In his text on Goethe Benjamin wrote the following of art criticism: 'Beauty is not a semblance, not a veil covering something else. It itself is not appearance but purely essence-one which, of course, remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled. Therefore, even if everywhere else semblance is deception, the beautiful semblance is the veil thrown over that which is necessarily most veiled. For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil. Unveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous [*unscheinbar*]. Here is the basis of the age-old view that that which is veiled is transformed in the unveiling, that it will remain "like unto itself" only underneath the veiling. Thus, in the face of everything beautiful, the idea of unveiling becomes that of the impossibility of unveiling. It is the idea of art criticism. The task of art criticism is not to lift the veil but rather, through the most precise knowledge of it as a veil, to raise itself for the first time to the true view of the beautiful.' Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume I: 1913-1926*, (Eds.) Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, pp.297-360, p.351.

51 Nonetheless Benjamin evidently did intend to capture, without judgement, something of the decisive possibilities being worked through in Russia at the time: 'Moscow as it appears at the present reveals a full range of possibilities in schematic form: above all, the possibility that the Revolution might fail or succeed.' 'Letter to Martin Buber February 23, 1927', op. cit., p.132. Towards the end of his trip, Benjamin wrote to Siegfried Kracauer, 'I am planning to write something "comprehensive" about Moscow. But as is so often the case with me, this will probably divide itself up into particularly small and disparate notes and for the most part the reader will be left to his own devices. [...] however much or little I manage to convey to my friends, these two months were a truly incomparable experience for me. To return richer in vivid perceptions than in theory – this had been my intent and I think I have profited by it.' Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Siegfried Kracauer 23 February 1927', *October* No.35, 1985, p.129.

52 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844), op. cit.

53 This question is therefore pursued in greater detail with regards to surrealist and Marxist exegesis in a section on 'The Bewitched Spot' later in this Chapter.

‘Diary’ is such an extraordinary document is its peculiar combination of intensely observed external detail and reflection on Benjamin’s own state and internal flux over his affair with Asja Lacis. There is no doubt this influenced *Inventory*’s editors, who sought to combine the external and internal experience, whether banal or impassioned, of the observer in the registration and presentation of the objects of their observation.<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin, seeing the possibilities for flux from ‘the *life of private property*’ (even the ‘end of private life’) in the novel and transformative situation in Moscow, paid close attention to the relations of use, property and exchange at work in the city.<sup>55</sup> Benjamin’s use of ‘inventory’ as a term in these writings visits a number of registers each of significance for *Inventory* as a journal.<sup>56</sup> No matter how ‘immense’, Benjamin is clear that this ‘grand’, inventory could be known – it was a question of research and self-theorisation on the part of the Russian people, and this might give us a clue to Benjamin’s orientation against theory in this series of observational essays. Benjamin refused, to borrow a phrase from E.P. Thompson, to cover the self-activity of the people of the Soviet Union with the ‘condescension of posterity’.<sup>57</sup> For Benjamin, history was in process and however miserable things looked, he sought to accord words, things and people an agency potentially foreclosed by theoretical judgement.

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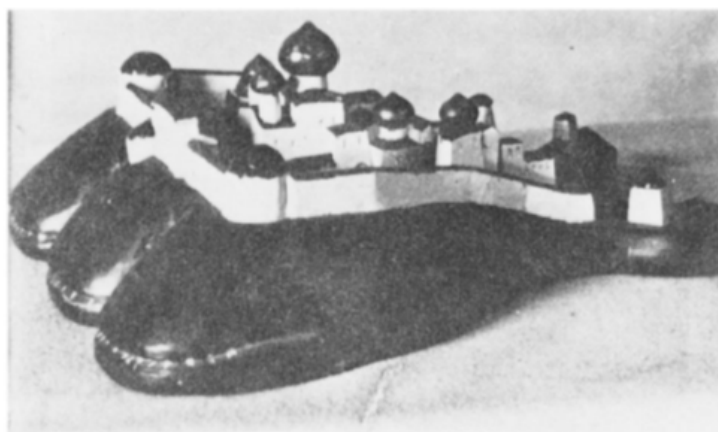
54 In fact several late texts contain substantial romantic biographical content interlaced with street reportage and philosophical reflections, for example *Inventory*, ‘Flesh and Stone’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005 and *Inventory*, ‘Exquisite Corpse’, in John Russell (ed.), *Frozen Tears*, Birmingham: ARTicle Press, University of Central England, 2003, pp.703–716.

55 ‘Benjamin focused on studying the universe of objects, which he saw as iterating the end of private life.’ Evgenii Bershtein, “‘The Withering of Private Life’”, Walter Benjamin in Moscow’, In *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia, Taking the Revolution Inside*, Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Eds.), pp.217–29. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, p.220.

56 ‘Inventory’ is used to relate to three forms of property: 1/ Property of the State or City Council (state or public property and infrastructure); 2/ Property of a shopkeeper (private property, commodities); 3/ A new form of collective property or wealth, seemingly limitless, human and geographic, not or not yet quantifiable nor yet assigned numerical properties. In German ‘inventory’ translates as *Bestandsverzeichnis*.(n) [*Bestand* (duration, continuance, amount, balance)+ *verzeichnis* (list or catalogue) or *Inventar* (n) (inventory; assets and liabilities). Dagmar Först, *Collins German College Dictionary*, Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1995.

57 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1966, p.14.

*Painted wooden toy representing the earth on three whales.  
Motif derived from Russian legend.*



*Image: Wooden Toy depicting the earth on the back of three whales, illustration to Walter Benjamin, 'Moscow Diary,'  
October, No.35, Winter 1985*

## Inventory as List

In Benjamin's writing inventory is a kind of numerical tracking system or index for state or privately-owned objects; the entire stock of goods in a merchant's shop; a metaphor, making the street a kind of giant warehouse; as the entire contents of a room, 'scanty'; to describe the efforts of the Russian people to count their human and territorial wealth – this is suggestive of an immense geographical, biological, agricultural, but also possibly, anthropological survey. In the essay 'Travelling Without Moving', *Inventory* editor, Adam Scrivener describes a form of repetitive attention generated by the habitual daily journey to work and home in similar terms.<sup>58</sup> Through these observations, despite being taken in 'through a detached, half asleep gaze'

you know your journey intimately, every brick of every house, every backyard, every shop sign, dustbin and lamppost has been meticulously documented.<sup>59</sup>

To describe the particularities of this experience, one which dulls not only perception but also will power, Scrivener enumerates those objects of which despite the rigidity of the subject are perceived precisely and become drawn into a relation of intimacy and familiarity. From both the perspective of subjectivity *and* objectivity interactions are generated through modern urban experience which point beyond thinghood. Crucially, 'document[ation]' is not beholden to the specialist's gaze, but suggests a survey every commuter is caught up within.

As a potential aggregation of such contributions – in relation to the journal – 'inventory' then, may signify an index; a tracking system for objects; a project of 'grand' and almost monstrous scale; a way of looking at the city and its population morphologically or physiognomically through its phenomena, an inexhaustible survey; a survey that might contain many disciplines at once. It is my contention here that throughout its conception *Inventory* as a title sought to encompass each of these meanings and frustrate any settled relation between container and contained. The subsumptive index of objects by which the term would dominate the particular

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58 'Travelling without moving' appeared in the *Mule* Newspaper, it was also re-printed in the RCA catalogue *A to B and back again* and in an issue of *Head* magazine. It really touched a nerve. It is informed by taking the 38 bus from Dalston to SOAS (and back) for eight and a half years.' Adam Scrivener email correspondence with the author, 24 March, 2019.

59 Adam Scrivener, 'Travelling Without Walking', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.20–23, p.20.

object to a universal concept of it is instead constantly being pulled out of shape.<sup>60</sup> In this sense it is ‘creatural’ – monstrous – its shape subject to the unpredictable proliferating fluctuating constellations that human difference and arrangements of objects might throw up.

An inventory is a kind of list. Beyond the listing of contents on the cover and of words in the Glossary sections the journal frequently featured ‘lists’, found and reproduced verbatim from various sources and generated in their texts. In the list’s suspension of qualitative judgement, in relation to Benjamin’s survey of Moscow, the anthropological resonances of inventory as a list become clearer. As Peter Osborne explains, ‘maintaining multiple cultures on a single plane of significance’, was one of the key achievements of modernist anthropology.<sup>61</sup> Enumeration and classification are powerful acts organising and potentially exercising remote power over both objects and beings. However, *Inventory* insisted that this might not be only a matter of power over, but of subversive power, of undoing power’s operations. Reflecting on the act of collection in a special issue entitled ‘Collected’, *Inventory* state that they would ‘oppose any object as meaningful in isolation and would mistrust any serial arrangement or permanent fixing of things’, instead they affirm ‘the play of interpretation upon interpretation’.<sup>62</sup> Whilst the activity of establishing ‘a single plane of significance’ is implied, it is supplemented by interpretative ‘play’ which emphasises restlessness and process rather than arrival at a final artefact or outcome. *Inventory*’s editors emphasise their position, ‘finding and losing, losing and finding, are of as much importance as collecting. Yet collecting must be understood as a perpetual revolt against any form of stasis.’<sup>63</sup> We can identify *Inventory*’s propensity for lists and sociological ambitions as bridging the two forms of anthropology which Osborne describes: both the ‘decolonial’ establishment of ‘multiple cultures on a single plane of things significance’ and the ‘post-colonial’ ‘transnational and translational study of the cultural’.<sup>64</sup> However, there is a temporal significance to *Inventory*’s proximity to Benjamin’s survey of post-revolutionary Russia, as Toni deSilva’s cryptic note to the journal’s first issue queries, ‘inventory are logical forerunners to political and social crisis. Do

60 Here I use the term subsumption in its Kantian form. In doing so I am indebted to extremely useful comparative study of the concept of subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx by Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia. ‘The various forms of subsumptive judgement presented by Kant in his first and third critiques [...] offers an account of the basic problem and modifications of the concept in its critical-philosophical form, i.e., as a concept that still denotes logical inclusion or categorisation (as in its ‘classic’ form) but (1) as a relation of determination between elements that are not formally homogenous, (2) as the mediating condition of an apparently self-sufficient totality and (3) as a process dependent on a pre-existing ground of unity (a totality of composition within which both the subsumed and subsuming entity exist).’ Andrés Sáenz De Sicilia, ‘The Problem of Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx’, PhD Thesis, London: The Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University, April 2016, p.7.

61 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London ; New York: Verso Books, 2013, pp.163-164.

62 *Inventory*, ‘Inventory: Cool, Calm and ...’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.4-7, p.4.

63 Ibid.

64 *Anywhere or Not at All*, op. cit., pp.163-164.

societies harvest before a storm?’<sup>65</sup>

The wider cultural significance for *Inventory* of the flattening enumeration suggested by Benjamin’s ‘Moscow Diary’, of which one could find examples in surrealism, conceptual art, postmedia and online culture, are discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6 where the appropriation of social techniques of bureaucracy and publicity developed through a culture of self-publishing produce discrete forms of what I shall later describe as a ‘rough conceptualism’.

In the present chapter, building on the analyses developed in the last I am primarily interested in the ways in which the list or inventory resonates with an anthropological or sociological perspective on the world. The subsequent sections will indicate further how Benjamin’s technique, initially only suggested here, would become for *Inventory* a means of connecting and articulating analyses of the urban environment, proximate and remote cultures, personal experience and social totality together.

## Between Magic and Positivism

In a potent denunciation, Adorno accused Benjamin’s study of 19th century Paris of occupying a space between ‘magic’ and ‘positivism’. ‘That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell’, he wrote.<sup>66</sup> *Inventory*’s relation to this debate developed through a slight, but significant,

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65 Tony deSilva, ‘Categories’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.76–77, p.77.

66 ‘The direct inference from the duty on wine to *L’Ame du Vin* imputes to phenomena precisely that kind of spontaneity, palpability and density which they have lost in capitalism. In this sort of immediate – I would almost say again, anthropological – materialism, there is a profoundly romantic element, and the more crassly and roughly you confront the Baudelairean world of forms with the necessities of life, the more clearly I detect it. The ‘mediation’ which I miss and find obscured by materialistic-historiographic invocation, is nothing other than the theory which your study omits. The omission of the theory affects your empirical evidence itself. On the one hand, it lends it a deceptively epic character, and on the other it deprives the phenomena, which are experienced only subjectively, of their real historico-philosophical weight. To express it another way: the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to turn into a wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wished to put it very drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell – your own resolute, salutarily speculative theory. It is the claim of theory alone that I am bringing against you.’ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Letter to Walter Benjamin 10 November, 1938’ op. cit., p.129-130. The original passage in German. ‘Der unmittelbare Rück- schluß von der Weinststeuer auf *L’Ame du Vin* schiebt den Phänomenen eben jene Art von Spontaneität, Handgreiflich- keit und Dichte zu, deren sie im Kapitalismus sich begeben haben. In dieser Art des unmittelbaren, fast möchte ich wie- derum sagen, des anthropologischen Materialismus, steckt ein tief romantisches Element, und ich spüre es um so deutlicher, je krasser und rauher die Baudelairesche Formwelt mit der Notdurft des Lebens von Ihnen konfrontiert wird. Die "Vermittlung", die ich vermis- se, und verdeckt finde durch materialistisch -historiographische Beschwörung, ist nun aber nichts anderes als eben die Theorie, die Ihre Arbeit ausspart. Das Aussparen der Theorie affiziert die Empirie. Es verleiht ihr einen trügend epischen Charakter auf der einen Seite und bringt auf der andern Seite die Phänomene, als eben bloß subjektiv erfahrene um ihr eigentliches geschichtsphilosophisches Gewicht. Man kann es auch so ausdrücken: das theologische Motiv, die Dinge beim Namen zu nennen, schlägt tendenziell um in die staunende Darstellung der bloßen Faktizität. Wollte man sehr drastisch reden, so könnte man sagen, die Arbeit sei am

reference to ‘that bewitched spot’ in an early draft press release; in a direct and thorough discussion of Benjamin’s ‘Baudelaire Studies’ and *Passagen-Werk* in “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’: Walter Benjamin and the City’ by Paul Claydon and later, in a fully developed editorial containing elements of the earlier press release, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’ which uses the phrase, ‘a bewitched objectivity’.<sup>67</sup> I argue that Adorno and Benjamin’s ‘bewitched spot’ became for the group a point of identification, and whilst this suggests a partisan leaning towards Benjamin’s position another way of understanding this gesture is to see it as a form of identification, of the group and the journal, precisely with this point of tension between the two writers and the methodological distinctions they sought to carve out with reference to other positions.

*Inventory* adopted a self-consciously fragile position as one of strength, or at least desperate resistance. The ‘spot’ is a position located between two problematic, and even discredited, practices: magic and positivism. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno describes how commodity fetishism has taken a hold on human consciousness to such an extent that it could be considered in some sense complete: ‘In the spell, the reified consciousness has become total.’<sup>68</sup> We might surmise, under capital’s diabolical totality, no ‘spot’, no phenomena, is any less accursed than the next. In his late work, Adorno returns to this matrix, to reexamine the relationship between mimesis, art, truth and knowledge.<sup>69</sup> In fact Benjamin’s critique of Kant involved the recovery of what he called ‘*magische Kritik*’ (magical criticism).<sup>70</sup> Christopher Bracken argues that Kant’s positioning of cognition and the cogniser as active forces in the construction of the object of perception.<sup>71</sup> Criticism becomes a

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Kreuzweg von Magie und Positivismus angesiedelt. Diese Stelle ist verhext. Nur die Theorie vermöchte den Bann zu brechen: Ihre eigene, die rücksichtslose, gut spekulative Theorie. Es ist deren Anliegen allein, das ich gegen Sie anmelde.’ *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Briefe 6 bande*, Herausgegeben von Gershorn Scholem und Theodor W. Adorno, Suhrkamp, 1978, p.786.

67 *Inventory*, ‘Press release for *Inventory* Vo.1 No.1.’ Chelsea School of Art Archives, *Inventory* Archive, undated (c.1994-5); Paul Claydon, “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’: Walter Benjamin and the City’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.36-65 and *Inventory*, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8.

68 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Trans. E.B. Ashton. London: Continuum, 2007, p.346.

69 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, London: New York: Continuum Press, 1997, p.54. Crucial to the relationships Adorno describes and mobilises throughout Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is a theory of knowledge and ontology which breaks with the neo-Kantianism of his peers: Gyorgy Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, and later, Jürgen Habermas. A comprehensive and critically argued account of the problems of neo-Kantian Marxism is provided by Gillian Rose in Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, London: Verso, 2009, pp.32-39.

70 Christopher Bracken, *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press, 2007, p.16.

71 ‘In his 1919 doctoral dissertation, published as *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, Benjamin argues that for the early Romantics, who were thoroughly versed in Kant’s thought, “the concept of criticism [Kritik] had acquired . . . an almost magical meaning [*magische Bedeutung*] . . . the term explicitly connoted not the sense of a merely discerning, unproductive state of mind; rather, for the Romantics and for speculative philosophy, the term ‘critical’ meant objectively productive, creative out of thoughtful deliberation.” In yoking the concepts of magic and criticism together, Benjamin ventures the possibility that a living consciousness animates the work of art. On this hypothesis, cognition not only produces the work but inhabits the work it produces.’ *Ibid*, Quoting Walter Benjamin, ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed.



productive process, one in which the criticiser is a part and co-constructive of the object they approach.

In *Inventory*'s first formulation of the 'bewitched spot', identification with it implies being 'in close up, almost too close' to 'phenomena', deploying photographic metaphors which bear strong semblance to Benjamin's 'inconspicuous spot', where the present rediscovers the future in the past.<sup>72</sup> In the later revision of this text, the writers develop the photographic metaphor further:

The moment the fragment becomes resuscitated as an emblem it transforms the social picture from one of irredeemable and alienated activity to one of the recognisable yet still complex relationships. It is an approach to phenomena in close up, almost too close. A kind of particularism, a zooming in on phenomena, so its form becomes blurred, allowing examination of its contents while simultaneously displacing it from its presumed situation. Or conversely, a zoom-out whereby the outlines may again become blurred so that it can be fused with its surroundings and spatial situation, or thrown into stark relief [...] a sensualist approach is taken in which the visual is held in suspension by a multi-sensorial analysis.<sup>73</sup>

In Benjamin's texts photographic magic establishes a kind of second nature through which, via a 'spark of contingency' and 'cellular' view the future can be apprehended, in a historical sense.<sup>74</sup> This account therefore refers back to Benjamin's own conception of speculative experience, itself modelled on his account of the technologised vision of photography, but 'vision does not occupy the privileged position'. This method which opened itself to 'magic' therefore depended upon the production of 'fragments', but through a logic of 'construction' which did not necessarily make a 'totality', but instead a 'constellation'. In a second rendering of the passage quoted above, developed for their later editorial 'Do You Feel Crushed?', *Inventory* clarify their own approach to the 'objects' of their investigation.

Ours is a kind of contaminated analysis. We seek that bewitched spot, a vision sauvage

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Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 142 (emphasis added); Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, bk. 1, Ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 51.

<sup>72</sup> *Inventory*, 'Press release for *Inventory* Vo.1 No.1.' op. cit.

<sup>73</sup> 'Do You Feel Crushed?', op. cit, p.5.

<sup>74</sup> 'A Small History of Photography', *One Way Street*, op. cit. p.243.

which, rather than taking material phenomena as a given, would seize an object and reconstellate it, allowing other interpretations, other stories. Thus the essay form is our preferred medium of exegesis for an intimate analysis of our inner and outer material lives. Its is ‘closest to its object, and the closest to social life, meaning merely a series of essays or infinite attempts that is never concluded’.<sup>75</sup>

Here the group make explicit that their work involves ‘coming close [...] to the object’, but whilst this indicates an approach to the object distinguished from other forms of investigation, which we will examine more closely soon, it is also an approach which transforms and ‘reconstellate[s] it’.<sup>76</sup> Exploring the close study of camera technology further in light of Benjamin’s theories, Paul Claydon proposed grasping ‘stimuli’ as ‘cognitive fragments’.<sup>77</sup> This has strong resonances with *Inventory*’s method. The location, then of the ‘bewitched spot’, therefore suggests sympathy with the impossible spaces implied in previous chapters with regards to a taxonomic space between, and disruptive of, existing categories, but also, as I continue to explore below, the problematic convergence between art (surrealism) and ethnography. I shall begin by sketching Benjamin and critical theory’s relationship to surrealism.

## Critical Theory and Surrealist Method

From the late-1920s and early 1930s Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno found initial agreement that surrealism might provide a method which, alongside historical materialism, could assist them in the development of a critique of the culture of commodity capitalism.<sup>78</sup> Alarmed by capitalism’s incorporation of enlightenment science as an instrument of large-scale industry, and its objectification of humans as workers and consumers, both Adorno and Benjamin felt that surrealism might offer an immanent critique of what capitalist culture largely repressed. As Paul Claydon

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75 *Inventory*, ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8, p.6. Quoting Michael Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p.ix.

76 *Ibid.*

77 ‘If stimuli are considered dialectically, that is, transformed into cognitive fragments, then the shock experience becomes politically instructive; if, seconds after the light of a flash bulb has burst, you close your eyes, you will see the transformed image of that explosion drifting, in front of your vision. That momentary image is the dialectical after-image. Continue to ignore it and you remain open to the manipulation of the apparatus that deliver those shocks.’ Paul Claydon, *op. cit.*, p.63.

78 ‘The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography’, *op. cit.*, p.270-279; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, New York: Free Press, 1977, p.125.

argues, '[a]s fascism grew in Europe, so too grew the urgency for an effective and politically expedient approach in the two men's work.'<sup>79</sup> Less remarked upon in most accounts of these exchanges is that in them surrealism offered the model of a practice which was neither strictly political nor academic.<sup>80</sup> Benjamin wrote in his 1929 essay that surrealism was 'the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination [...] a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration'.<sup>81</sup> Khatib has described 'profane illumination' as 'a moment of dialectical illumination when the opposition between enlightened consciousness and mythical or religious experience is suspended.'<sup>82</sup> If capitalism represented soulless rationalisation, and fascist and national socialist movements formulated an almost mystical 'reactionary modernism' as its response, any viable progressive movement needed to overcome these oppositions dialectically.<sup>83</sup> In this sense, Benjamin's conceptualisation of surrealism describes a kind of 'crossroads of magic and positivism', which Adorno would later characterise, in a heated exchange, as one of Benjamin's key methodological flaws.<sup>84</sup> Yet, Benjamin's enthusiasm for surrealism was also critical: '[t]his profane illumination did not always find the Surrealists equal to it, or to themselves'<sup>85</sup>, and generally of the Parisian cultural scene he surmised, 'characteristic of this whole left-wing bourgeois position is its irremediable coupling of idealistic morality with political practice.'<sup>86</sup> These criticisms, which pose a problem for the automatic connection of surrealism to political practices, were sharpened through extensive discussions with his friend, Adorno.<sup>87</sup> By 1936 clashes between Benjamin and Adorno

79 "“Botanizing on the Asphalt”", op. cit., p.45.

80 In light of this argument it is notable that Benjamin's work on what was to become the *Passagenarbeit*, or *Arcades* project began as a group work and fused with the work he had already developed in intensive discussion with a number of interlocutors: Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Gretel Adorno and others.

81 Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: NLB, 1979, p.227.

82 Sami Khatib, 'To Win the Energies of Intoxication for the Revolution', op. cit.

83 See Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

84 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Letter to Walter Benjamin 10 November, 1938', in Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, György Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin. *Aesthetics and Politics*, (Ed.) Fredric Jameson, London: Verso, 2007, p.129-130.

85 Ibid., p.227.

86 Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', Ibid., p.234. This statement has been taken by various writers (e.g. Webster) as a dismissal of the surrealists generally and specifically Bataille's position. However, this is far from self-evident. Through a more careful reading it appears that Benjamin did indeed question any immediate translation of artistic practice into political practice, but in this case he is quite clearly distinguishing between surrealism, and intellectuals such as Beraud, Fabre-Luce and Duhamel who fuelled nationalism and conservatism by agitating from 'a feeling of obligation, not to the Revolution, but to 'traditional culture', whereas '[o]nly in contrast to the helpless compromises of "sentiment" are certain central features of Surrealism, indeed of the Surrealist tradition, to be understood.' p.234. Cf. 'The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography', op. cit., p.267. Certainly this statement could be construed, especially retrospectively, to apply to various surrealist fellow travellers such as Denis de Rougemont and Bataille's co-editor on *Documents*, Arnaud Dandieu. For an exploration of such figures see: Christian Roy, 'Arnaud Dandieu and the Epistemology of Documents', *Papers of Surrealism* No.7, 2008.

87 Susan Buck-Morss, suggests that, based upon their 1929 meetings at Konigstein, Adorno and Benjamin shared enthusiasm for surrealism. (p.125) But, as the 1930s drew on Adorno realised the 'ultimate inadequacy of the surrealist model.' *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, op. cit., p.127. Steven Webster however argues that Adorno

came to a head over Benjamin's precise orientation towards surrealism, as well as the relationship, in his work, of surrealism to 'romanticism' and materialism. The debate turned upon issues of 'construction' and 'presentation', and each interlocutor's orientation towards theory, in terms that expressed the dynamic tensions of the pair's common struggle for new forms of written expression and readership. These issues went to the heart of Benjamin's method across a series of writings he developed in preparation for the unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, or *Arcades* project, and a number of complete and fragmentary writings extant and lost, known as 'The Baudelaire Studies'.<sup>88</sup> The discussion is relevant to earlier writings such as 'Moscow Diary' and 'One Way Street' because it is there Benjamin's method of allowing a complex picture of totality to emerge from the close, 'wide-eyed', study of material life was first put into practice, in the world-historical context of the crises of German deflation and Russian post-revolutionary reconstruction. These writings, and those of the 'Baudelaire Studies' or *Arcades Project* lent themselves to *Inventory* as specifically urban modes of intellectual enquiry and writing which served as models of the fierce sociology they had derived from Bataille's projects.

By pursuing these initially obscure methodological discussions at length I argue that we can come to reenvision the relation between sociology, Marxism, critical theory and surrealism in an original light and that a key aspect of *Inventory*'s import as a site of intellectual production was not just to have brought these relationships into view but also to have fashioned from them an active and critical social practice which restores critical theory's radically emancipatory potential.

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and Benjamin sought in surrealism a mediating practice for the theory of historical materialism. 'While benefiting from Lukacs's theory, Benjamin, Brecht, and Adorno were able to go beyond him in the recognition that modernism was integral to the production processes of advanced capitalism, and not merely their ideological expression. [...] Consequently they were committed to an immanent critique of surrealist form, that is, a critique that developed its theory dialectically, through surrealist practice.' Steven Webster, 'The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography', in Marc Manganaro (Ed.), *Modernist Anthropology: From Fieldwork to Text*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, pp.266-99, p.279.

- 88 Frederic Jameson's preface to the discussion summarises, 'The correspondence between the two represents, in fact, one of the most important aesthetic exchanges of the thirties anywhere in Europe. Four of the most significant of these letters are printed below - three from Adorno, with one reply from Benjamin. They concern, respectively: 1. Benjamin's draft outline for his *Arcades* project, written in 1935 (entitled 'Paris- The Capital of the Nineteenth Century', now in Charles Baudelaire, pp. 155-70); 2. his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', published in 1936 (included in *Illuminations*, pp. 219-53); 3. and 4. his original study of Baudelaire, composed in 1938 (designated 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in Charles Baudelaire, pp. 9-106).' 'Presentation III', Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, György Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin. *Aesthetics and Politics*, (Ed.) Fredric Jameson. London: Verso, 2007, p.100. There is also an account of the Baudelaire studies in relation to the *Arcades* project in Theodor W. Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in *Prisms*, (Trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997, pp.237-238. This information may be somewhat outdated now. It is evident from close examination that some of the material under discussion did not end up in either of the published versions listed by Jameson or Adorno, yet has since been found and published on its discover and significance see Giorgio Agamben, 'Not a Drop Left', June 2014, (Trans. Heinrich Haine (an anonymous *Inventory* contributor)), <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/not-drop-left>

## Benjamin's Anthropological Materialism

Benjamin's relationship to anthropology is complex, and there are significant barriers to understanding what 'anthropological materialism' he was referring to in his texts on surrealism and in the exchange between himself and Adorno. However, Benjamin's attendance of meetings of the College of Sociology and discussion the work of Bataille and Caillois at length with several figures close to the Frankfurt Institute<sup>89</sup> suggests a high level of exposure to Bataille's 'sacred sociology' and the tradition (Durkheim and Mauss) it drew from. In discussions around his trip to Moscow, as we have seen, Benjamin indicates he wished to allow 'theory' to develop out of 'creatural' or anthropological observation.<sup>90</sup> Further attention to the correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin reveals that some form of anthropology is definitely at stake.

[The study] imputes to phenomena precisely that kind of spontaneity, palpability and density which they have lost in capitalism. In this sort of immediate – I would almost say again, anthropological – materialism, there is a profoundly romantic element, and the more crassly and roughly you confront the Baudelairean world of forms with the necessities of life, the more clearly I detect it. The 'mediation' which I miss and find obscured by materialistic-historiographic invocation, is nothing other than the theory which your study omits. The omission of the theory affects your empirical evidence itself.<sup>91</sup>

Adorno, thus chides Benjamin for his 'immediate materialism', which is made here commensurate with 'anthropological materialism'. Adorno detects a 'romantic' element in the text, and this is here associated with 'anthropological materialism', and elsewhere with Benjamin's attitude to surrealism. For Benjamin, the romantic movement was a crucial precursor to surrealism, but 'romanticism' was a contemporary tendency from which he was to carefully distinguish himself and criticise in his own account of 'magic', art and surrealism.<sup>92</sup>

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89 See my discussion of the work of Michael Weingrad, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research', op. cit.

90 Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Martin Buber February 23, 1927', *October* No.35, 1985, p.132. For Benjamin's inventive anthropology of the 'creatural' see also 'Benjamin's theologically charged name for the mode of existence that inhabits the zone of indifference between politics, psychophysics, and psychoanalysis is the "creature" – a term he distilled from the works of Franz Rosenzweig, Karl Kraus, Bertolt Brecht, Adolf Loos, and the utopian science fiction novelist Paul Scheerbart.' Sami Khatib, 'To Win the Energies of Intoxication for the Revolution', op. cit., p.7.

91 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Letter to Walter Benjamin 10 November, 1938' op. cit, p.129.

92 'The aesthetic of the painter, the poet, *en etat de surprise*, of art as the reaction of one surprised, is enmeshed in a number of pernicious romantic prejudices. Any serious exploration of occult, surrealist, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic tum of mind is impervious.' 'Surrealism',

## Method Without Theory

In the debate Benjamin defended himself against Adorno's accusation of the 'omission of [...] theory' in the study. As in the 'Moscow Diary', in these studies Benjamin deliberately suppressed or sublated theory in favour of 'illumination' through the 'constellation' of the objects of his research. Adorno, on the other hand, insisted on the necessity of 'mediation' of these objects through 'total social process.'<sup>93</sup> Adorno began by expressing '[him]self in as simple and Hegelian a manner as possible.'<sup>94</sup> After chiding Benjamin on the improper and 'methodologically unfortunate' interrelation of 'features' from the 'infrastructure' to the 'superstructure', Adorno claims, '[m]aterialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the total social process.'<sup>95</sup> The problem and the dependence on its solution of an elusive revelation of 'total social process' increasingly becomes the crux, for Adorno, around which the entire presentation of the work turns.<sup>96</sup> Benjamin's defence was deferential, up to a point, and pragmatic: '[t]his deficiency may be traced in part to the daring attempt to write the second part of the book before the first.'<sup>97</sup> The essay under discussion, what was to become 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', was part of a much larger and uncompleted study of Baudelaire which had its origins in the, also uncompleted, *Arcades Project*. Benjamin makes clear that the 'wide-eyed presentation of mere facts'<sup>98</sup> was at this point 'necessary not only for its results, but had to be built into the construction for its own sake.'<sup>99</sup> Yet both Adorno and Benjamin drew upon Karl Marx's distinction between presentation and enquiry in their work.

Of course the method of presentation [*Darstellungsweise*] must differ in form from that

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op. cit, pp.189. Caygill summarises Benjamin's critique of the romantic movement: 'Benjamin's critique of German Romanticism exemplifies his finite, transformative concept of critique. It does not begin with a philosophically secured concept of truth and value which is then applied to an object in a critical judgement, but rather philosophy itself is risked in the critical encounter.' *The Colour of Experience*, op. cit, p.50. The romantic movement – particularly the early German romanticism developed at Jena – remained important reference points for both Adorno and Benjamin, despite the former's criticisms and the latter's defensiveness around this term.

93 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Letter to Walter Benjamin: New York, 10 November 1938' in *Aesthetics and Politics*, op. cit, 126–133, p.129.

94 Ibid., p.128.

95 Ibid., all quotations p.129.

96 'the mediation through the total social process is missing, and you superstitiously attribute to material enumeration a power of illumination which is never kept for a pragmatic reference but only for theoretical construction.' Ibid., p.130.

97 Walter Benjamin, 'Walter Benjamin letter to Theodor W. Adorno Paris, 9 December 1938', *Aesthetics and Politics*, op. cit., p.138.

98 Adorno to Benjamin p.129, Benjamin to Adorno p.136, *ibid.*

99 Ibid., p.136.

of enquiry [*Forschungsweise*]. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail to analyse its different forms of development to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the actual movement be presented in conformity with it. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an *a priori* construction.<sup>100</sup>

Here, a crucial relation is developed between Marx's description of his method and the dialectical position of circulation in his work. Marx emphasises the primacy of production in his model of capital, but by the end of his work '[o]nly after this work has been done', circulation, which is the final stage of the individual commodity, appears as the very presupposition to it. Jarius Banaji's argues that the return of the individual commodity to the 'sphere of circulation' initiates the subsequent cycle. Therefore through the sale of the commodity 'Circulation is posited as both presupposition and result of the Immediate Process of Production.'<sup>101</sup> Though Marx is clear that 'Production predominates', he concedes that 'production is itself determined by the other moments'.<sup>102</sup> This is to emphasise the dynamic movement of capital and its transformations not only of form but also appearances. In turn, Marx himself was drawing upon Hegel's distinction between essence and form (developed by Marx as form of appearance), or, simply, essence and appearance.<sup>103</sup> Yet, the elaboration of this method, in the postscript to the second edition of *Capital Volume I*, was also part of Marx's thoroughgoing effort to distinguish his method from Hegel's.

## Speculative Theory

In the debate between Benjamin and Adorno it seems at first to have been the latter who adhered most strictly to Marx's methodological principle. Benjamin proposed first to approach his material philologically in its fragmented state ('wide-eyed') then to reflect upon it philosophically. In this

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100 Karl Marx, 'Postface to the Second Edition', Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Ernest Mandel. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach, 1990, pp.???. Benjamin refers specifically to the passage in section N of the *Passagenwerk*, *The Arcades Project*, Belknap/Harvard, Cambridge, MA, 1999: Convolute N4a, 5, p.465, quoted in 'Not a Drop Left', op. cit. Stewart Martin argues that 'Adorno inherits this lineage of critiques of philosophical presentation through the decisive mediating influence of Benjamin.' 'Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy', op. cit, p.119.

101 Jarius Banaji, 'From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel's Dialectic in Marx's Capital', Diane Elson (Ed.), *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capital*, Verso: London, 2015 (1979), p.28.

102 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit., pp.99-100.

103 See Jarius Banaji, 'From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel's Dialectic in Marx's Capital', Diane Elson (Ed.), *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capital*, Verso: London, 2015 (1979), pp.19-20.



sense the enquiry and the presentation had an accretive quality, but rigorously discerned between essence and appearance. Rolf Tiedemann claims that ‘Benjamin’s intention was to bring together theory and materials, quotations and interpretation, in a new constellation compared to contemporary methods of representation.’<sup>104</sup> Reality differed from appearance and its essence would need to be constructed, built up part by part. Calling this Benjamin’s ““speculative construction” of the whole’<sup>105</sup> Howard Caygill proposes that Benjamin’s ‘speculative theory’, was to emerge through the construction of the entire project.<sup>106</sup>

This positive assessment of Benjamin’s project and explication of his speculative critique of Kant assists in the construction of a bridge between Adorno and Benjamin’s correspondence, their shared attention to the mediation of cultural phenomena by a society shaped by production and circulation of value and explains the ways ‘speculative experience’ implicates itself in the forms of materialism, and its presentation, which *Inventory* subsequently adopted and developed. *Inventory* modelled their inquiry on the ‘digressive’ course insisted upon which Benjamin had insisted: ‘[w]hat for the others are digressions are for me the data that determine my course’.<sup>107</sup> This remains open to the problems, charged by Adorno and Susan Buck-Morss at Benjamin’s arcades project, of departing from Marx’s insistence on the centrality of production and sailing off into the ‘dreamy waters of consumption’.<sup>108</sup> *Inventory* did not resolve this problem adequately. *Inventory*’s perspective would on this level of engagement appear to hew closely to Bataille’s understanding of the problem of labour in capitalism to that of sovereignty. Yet, their close attention to the object in its material (real, symbolic, unconscious relations) draws from but perhaps exceeds Bataille’s cosmological approach. Citing Arjun Appadurai, Adam Scrivener’s text insists on a ‘processual’ approach to the commodity, but one which breaks ‘significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on its total trajectory from production, through exchange and distribution, to consumption’.<sup>109</sup> This was as much due to their own working-situation (approached most directly in Chapter 6) as well as a propensity for contemporary theory to

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104 “‘Dialectics at a Standstill’”, op. cit, p.931

105 Howard Caygill, op. cit, p.135.

106 ‘At stake between him and his critic was the definition of the speculative; by focusing on the shortage of mediation Adorno was implicitly criticising him for not being sufficiently Hegelian, so missing the entire point of Benjamin’s speculative method and its roots in his own peculiar account of speculative experience.’ Ibid.

107 Walter Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, p.570 quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, ‘The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering’, in Beatrice Hanssen (Ed.), *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*. London; New York: Continuum, 2006, pp.33–65, p.39

108 ‘The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore’, op. cit, p.39

109 Arjun Appadurai, (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.13, quoted in Adam Scrivener, ‘Waste, Residues and Traces: Collecting as a Form of Consumption’, *Inventory*, ‘Collected’, Vol.2, No.2, 1997, pp.94-101.

emphasise circulation and consumption, which they were often critical of, as their own orientation (as a solution to Adorno's 'Marxist' critique of Benjamin) towards a sociological supplement (fierce sociology) and configuration of the journal as open to submissions, by which it could potentially overcome the existing division of intellectual labour and thus become open to class content. For *Inventory* presentation, as a journal, assumes an apparently rigid form of institutional research, while inquiry succumbs to the attraction and delirium of its objects. But each 'result' of these diverse inquiries is reintegrated into the presentation incrementally changing its given contents rather than being forced to conform to a given plan.

## Benjamin's Critique of Kant

In this key letter, Adorno opposed magic to positivism, suggesting that, at the stage of development under discussion, Benjamin was stuck, spellbound – like a wandering spirit – at a crossroads between the two. Positivism, for Adorno was a kind of irrational rationality – if idealism claims an absolute reality for the individual mind, positivism denies any discussion of how things could be otherwise. Positivism's insistence on facticity, for Adorno, increasingly became an apologetics and mask for what made real change impossible.<sup>110</sup> For Benjamin's historical account of modern experience, contingency – the emergence of the new, the thought that things might be otherwise – are crucial. Howard Caygill draws this out in his account of Benjamin's original critique of Kant and deviation from Hegel's philosophy of history.

The object of critique reflects the limitations of the given doctrine of criticism back upon the critic, who then approaches the object anew. In this way Benjamin repeats the Hegelian critique of the finite character of Kantian critique – its narrow notion of experience that banished the absolute from thought – but without the collateral of a progressive philosophy of history. The absolute is folded into experience in complex and often inconspicuous ways, which it becomes the task of critique not at the outset to judge, but first to delineate and map.<sup>111</sup>

According to Caygill, Benjamin therefore does not give up on totality (the absolute), instead it is 'folded into experience'. For Benjamin, the object transforms the subject of its investigation. The

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110 'the more the particular is defined as a mere object belonging to the universal without being able to affect it reciprocally, then the more the so-called facts become a mere cloak veiling what really exists.' Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, (Ed.) Rolf Tiedemann, (Trans. Rodney Livingstone), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006, p.30.

111 *The Colour of Experience*, op. cit., p.50.

fracture between Benjamin's speculative philosophy and Hegel's divides along the lines of the philosophy of history, even the question of temporality itself. Crucial to Benjamin's thinking through objects was their movement through time and the vicissitudes of obsolescence they are especially subject to in modernity. The objects that the surrealists encountered in Paris (for example at the *Marche aux puces*) and *Inventory* sought in 'waste, traces and residues' are closely connected to the correlating concept of the outmoded. The surrealists pointed the way for Benjamin to imagine a transformation of and through the object: '[n]o one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution – not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.'<sup>112</sup> Less has been said or written of the surrealists' passion for lost or outmoded images of totality and this was certainly an area exploited by *Inventory* in terms of drawing out the world-shaking transitions, shifts in consciousness, subjecthood and belief, with which the history of knowledge is littered. We might think of this as the destruction of a 'world' as in the *Flammarion Globe* (pictured overleaf), illustrative of the seemingly impossible passage between a flat world and a spherical one which is pictured as a comic and violent bursting through.<sup>113</sup> For Benjamin destruction was necessary for experience, "Construction" presupposes "Destruction", and equally historical time opens up a gap between the truth content and subject matter of artworks.<sup>114</sup> These are each ruptures in apparent unities which emerge from specific temporal intensities. Capitalist 'creative destruction' accelerates these processes, but generates a contradiction: that which intensifies historical experience also destroys its possibility.<sup>115</sup> In his lifetime Benjamin maintained the perspective that communism, inflected by the 'profane illumination' and 'revolutionary intoxications' of surrealism might offer an emancipatory path out of capitalist modernity, or rather into, the transformation of the gap that this contradiction presented. Adorno, in agreement with him up until the late 1920s and early 1930s had, by the time of their heated correspondence (1936) succumbed to a melancholy standpoint by which no revolution, at least emancipatory one, was possible.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> 'Surrealism', op. cit., p.229.

<sup>113</sup> Indeed, I believe *Inventory* appreciated and emphasised the comedic aspect of such estranging experiences of discovery which can involve both cognitive dissonance and the intensification of time and attention also present in moments of individual or collective laughter.

<sup>114</sup> *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., [N7, 6] p.470. On art works see Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', in *Selected Writings Volume I: 1913-1926*, op. cit., pp.116–200.

<sup>115</sup> 'Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction.' Walter Benjamin, 'Capitalism as Religion', *Selected Writings Volume I: 1913-1926*, op. cit., pp.288–291, p.289.

<sup>116</sup> 'As of 1932, the thinkers of Critical Theory practiced by the Frankfurt School no longer considered the proletariat as the historical subject of emancipation. They observed how Communist unions and National Socialist organised labour joined forces in the Berlin transportation strike of 1932. How could it have happened that workers possessed no immunity to fascism? Since then, the adherents of Critical Theory – along with the authors of the book before you – have discontinued investigating the emancipatory potentials within entire social groups and instead have turned to consider the raw material of these potentials, the ruptured, yet still lively INDIVIDUAL

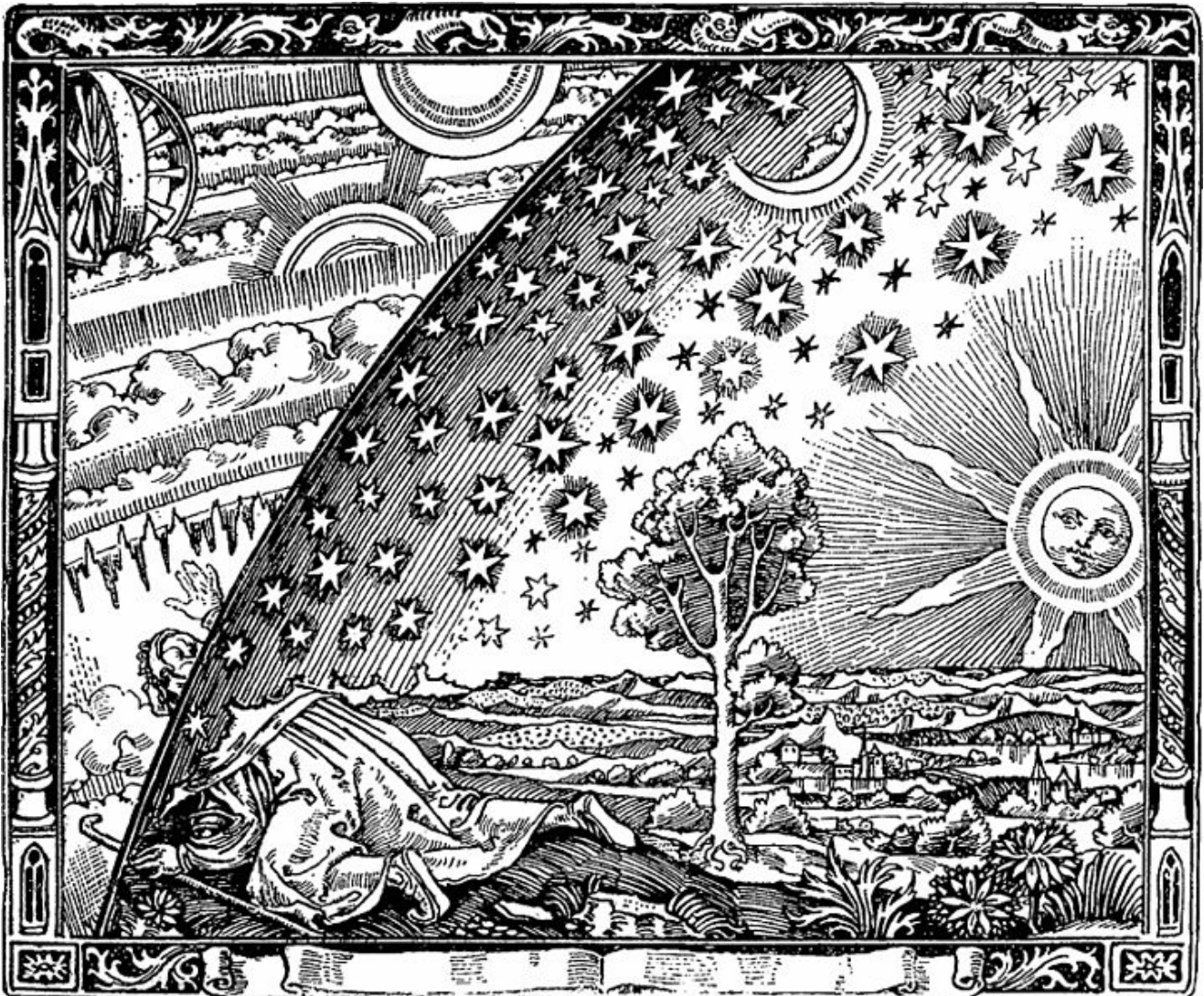


Image: Medieval woodcut, in which a medieval missionary recounts that he has found the spot where the sky and the Earth touch. The illustration, was used by Camille Flammarion (1842-1945), a French astronomer and popular science writer, to illustrate the notion that mediaeval man believed the Earth was flat

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CHARACTERISTICS located beneath the level of the whole person.' Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, (Trans. Richard Langston et al), New York: Zone Books, 2014, p.220.

# Materialism, Idealism and Totality

A brief discussion of materialism, idealism and totality is pertinent at this point because the discussion between Adorno and Benjamin converges and diverges on this ground, moreover my stake in presenting *Inventory* as a totality necessarily measures itself against related accounts of these concepts. A frequent claim issued by Marxists of various stripes is that other forms of study or research are not ‘total’ enough. Yet, for Marx, such a claim was not necessarily valid, in fact on occasion he even explicitly avoided using such terms, as we shall see shortly. Hegel’s claim, that ‘necessity in ideality is the inner self-development of the Idea.’ was countered by Marx, who sought to show that Hegel’s account of totality – as the state – was a mere appearance and one which was undermined in actuality by the existence of civil society and the ‘various classes’ it contained,<sup>117</sup> not as opposing wills inside the ideal state, but as two separate entities each made up of human actors and determinations.<sup>118</sup> Marx it seems, as has been argued by Étienne Balibar, went out of his way to avoid using the term ‘totality’ (the German ‘*das Ganze*’, the ‘whole’ or totality), using instead the French term ‘*ensemble*’.<sup>119</sup> The appearance of totality could only be ideal, because the concept, that

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117 Joseph Kosuth in ‘The Artist as Anthropologist’ discussed in the prior chapter quotes the following statement by Hegel, ‘Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself. In each of these parts, however, the philosophical Idea is found in a particular specificity, or medium. The single circle, because it is a real totality, bursts through the limits imposed by its special; medium, and gives rise to a wider circle. The whole of philosophy in this way resembles a circle of circles. The idea appears in each single circle, but, at the same time, the whole idea is constituted by the system of these peculiar phases, and each is a necessary member of this organization. How much of the particular parts is requisite to constitute a particular branch of knowledge is so far indeterminate, that the part, if it is to be something true, must not be an isolated member merely, but itself an organic whole. The entire field of philosophy therefore really forms a single science; but it may also be viewed as a total, composed of several particular sciences.’ Hegel quoted in Norman Levine, *Divergent Paths: Hegel in Marxism and Engelsism*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006, p.167.

118 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.69 and p.118-119.

119 Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*. London; New York: Verso, 1995, p.30. The section of text this applies to is the Sixth of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, ‘the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.’ As well as an obvious snub to Hegel and his individualism, Balibar argues that Marx’s differentiation of terms was also an explicit rejection of Hobbes and Bentham’s ‘monad’ and the ‘*grand etre*’ of Auguste Comte. The term ensemble is relevant to the constituent elements of a method, in Benjamin and Adorno, and thus by which we might consider *Inventory*’s hybrid approach an ‘ensemble’, or ‘constellation’ of methods. Stewart Martin has argued that Adorno’s own use of the term, in *Negative Dialectics*, ‘Philosophical thinking is the same as thinking in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of analyses of models.’ (p.29), possibly ‘mimics’ Marx’s use, and we can understand it as a ‘synonym for constellation’, an indication of Adorno’s ‘appropriation’ of Benjamin’s thought. Stewart Martin, op. cit., pp.137-38. These sensitive qualifications in accounting for the individual and system, and in terms of Marxist method, can be contrasted with the rather blunt wielding of the category of ‘totality’ by Benjamin and Adorno’s contemporary, Marxist philosopher and cultural critic, György Lukács: ‘It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science. The capitalist separation of the producer from the total process of production, the division of the process of labor into parts at the cost of the individual humanity of the worker, the atomization of society into individuals who simply go on

‘mystified mobile of abstract thought’, is only the means through which the non-existent unity of a totality can be presented.<sup>120</sup> *Inventory* also favoured the terms ensemble and assemblage, their own view of totality is resolutely negative, ‘desire for totality is just as enslaving as a life which, everyday, finds itself utterly re-routed and channelled by the productive energies of capital.’<sup>121</sup> Adorno’s ‘total social process’ without reference to human practice, could be only an *idea*. In an important passage, published as a postscript to the second edition of *Capital Vol.I* Marx distinguished his method from Hegel’s as ‘exactly opposite to it’.<sup>122</sup>

Out of Marx’s critique Adorno and Benjamin each sought forms of research and presentation in which their own thought was immanent, systematic and anti-system, in the sense of capital as a system and ‘totality’. Further evidence that Adorno had bent the stick too far against Benjamin at this point is given by his later inversion, in *Negative Dialectics*, of Hegel’s dictum ‘the true is the whole’ as ‘the whole is the false’, and in his contention that ‘[n]owhere does [Hegel] doubt the primacy of the whole.’<sup>123</sup> Bataille developed an anti-functionalist critique of Hegel focussed also on his based on the insight that ‘negativity cannot always be recuperated within possibility’ but within Hegel’s system ‘negativity performs a necessary function within the realm of possibility and therefore can, and indeed must, be regarded as useful.’<sup>124</sup> For Bataille any ‘system’ (in a multi-scale sense) remained unfinished so far as

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producing without rhyme or reason, must all have a profound influence on the thought, the science and the philosophy of capitalism . . . [Marx’s] science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method [...] The primacy of the category of totality.’  
György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 1971, p.27.

120 Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, p.1.

121 *Inventory*, ‘I Want More Life Fucker’, *Inventory*, Vol.3, No.2, 1999, p.4/

122 ‘My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of ‘the Idea’, is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought. [...] The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.’ Karl Marx, ‘Postface to the Second Edition’, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Ernest Mandel. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach, 1990, pp.94–103, p.102.

123 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Dwarf Fruit’ and ‘Dedication’ in *Minima Moralia*, (Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott) London: Verso, 2005, respectively p.50 and p.17. The second passage (pp.15-17) contains a sustained argument, against Hegel, for the necessity of post-war social analysis to learn from individual experience in the period of its ‘decay’.

124 ‘My efforts recommence and undo Hegel’s Phenomenology. Hegel’s construction is a philosophy of work, of ‘project’. The Hegelian man – Being and God – accomplished, is completed in the adequation of project” (ibid., 80). Bataille’s construction mimics or parodies this philosophy of work, of “project,” toward an experience of incompleteness, of play, and of uselessness. Negation, in Hegel’s thought, as Hyppolite and Sartre make clear during the “Discussion on Sin”, is always recuperated in a moment following: negation becomes the negation of negation through the course of history. For Hegel, there can be no true loss. Negativity performs a necessary function within the realm of possibility and therefore can, and indeed must, be regarded as useful. For Bataille, however, negativity cannot always be recuperated within possibility. Bataille recognizes an “unemployed negativity,” a negativity without function, without designation, without content. He recognizes this negativity as the substance of his own life in its isolation and insignificance. Hegel, then, remains the philosopher of work, of utility,

negativity can sustain itself. System therefore accommodates elements disruptive to system. For Bataille ‘*le part maudit*’ (the accursed share) could be found in labour with regard to capital, laughter with regard to logic, waste with regard to the commodity. This has profound implications whether we think of Bataille’s appropriation of the ‘Critical Dictionary’ in *Documents*, his anti-Bolshevik and Stalinist Marxism developed in dialogue with Simone Weil, Pierre Kaan, Collette Peignot and Boris Souvarine; or his appropriation of ethnography in both *Documents* and the College of Sociology; in each context the weak and heretical tendency, one which is distinctively oriented away from institutional and political power, is positioned to epistemologically undermine or even overthrow the more powerful side. These were cues for *Inventory*’s reconstruction of a method which could navigate the contradictory totality of contemporary capitalist society with attention to the aporia of particular and universal alike.

‘Totality’ nevertheless remains an idea which haunts many Marxists, and particularly in the present period of seemingly irrepressible and ‘total’ sprawl of capitalist forms across the planet. Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano’s recent attempt to produce a ‘critical and theoretical cartography of the world system in the present moment.’ is indicative.<sup>125</sup>

The ‘absolute’ is a theological and then a philosophical category, gesturing towards that which defies representation, which, contrasted to our mortal perception, is infinite and unencompassed. ‘Cartographies of the absolute’ is a wilfully paradoxical expression, but one that directs us toward the way in which picturing our social and economic world is a predicament at once technical and, so to speak, philosophical. Capitalism, after all, is a religion of everyday life, an actually-existing metaphysics.<sup>126</sup>

The materialist approach to the totality, or absolute, necessarily takes up and passes through the ‘wilfully paradoxical’ because, without a Hegelian recourse to the ideal, materialist research necessarily must engage the full perversity of the real abstractions of capitalism as particular instances of a mode of production and social relation. Marx, we might say, may

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of project, while Bataille recognizes himself as outside this system, as unemployable. Thus Bataille’s method ultimately consists in a tragic doubling of Hegelian thought.’ Stuart Kendall, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, Bataille, Georges, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, (Ed.) Stuart Kendall, (Trans. Stuart Kendall, and Michelle Kendall), Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, pp.xxxii.

125 Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, reviewed by Robert T. Tally Jr, <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2015/1815>

126 Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Alresford: Hants, Zero Books, 2015, p.23.



have practised materialism, but did not theorise it explicitly as a method.<sup>127</sup> Objects must be studied in their appearance and in their reality as expressive of something else: a social relation which instead appears as ‘the fantastic form of a relation between things’.<sup>128</sup> Marxist criticism must then either transform the objects of its enquiry, or find ways of showing, at least, the gap between appearance and real conditions by interrelating them. It is for these reasons that Benjamin and Adorno debated the reconstruction of Marx’s method in terms of its consequences for their own cultural criticism. As I’ll continue to discuss further, this debate became central for *Inventory* because what was to differentiate their project from that of the postmodern culture with which they were surrounded and was an attempt to leave no phenomena unexamined and present a critical account of the society in which they lived as a totality. Their conception of totality therefore included an account of dynamic tensions between structure, ‘whole’ and parts, ‘phenomena’. The totality is seen as in crisis, ‘crumbling’.

Society, sociality is composed of aggregations. Aggregations which are compressed and delineated by economic and political structures while simultaneously seeking to expand and break free of these structures. The once idealised notion of society as a ‘whole’ is crumbling as the notion of the state hangs on to its legitimacy as the reflection of society. While the state itself is eroded by multinational capitalism; which maintains certain elements of society and the state, such as the family unit or particular legislative practices, as agencies for recoding or suppressing any heterogeneous aggregations that might threaten it. Aggregations that are mobile, multiple, constructed, overlapping, transitory and a-logical nodes of attraction and repulsion. [...] Thus a fierce sociology can have an element of the ‘diagnostic’ in that it ‘investigates the limits and possibilities of how we have come to think about who we are and what we do, of how we act upon ourselves and others, and the present in which we find, and indeed discover ourselves.’<sup>129</sup>

For *Inventory*, the question of totality and social totality was to be informed by a rival

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127 ‘Various terms have been invented to express the philosophical content common to Marx’s work and to the political and social movement which acted in his name: the most famous of these is “dialectical materialism”, a relatively late term and one inspired by the use Engels had made of various of Marx’s formulations.’ Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*. London; New York: Verso, 1995, pp.1-2, a complete etymology of ‘dialectical materialism’ can be found on page 3.

128 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.I*, (Trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach), London: Penguin, 1990, p.83.

129 *Inventory, Coagulum*, *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.1, 2000, pp.4-11, p.5, quoting Mitchell Dean, ‘Sociology After Society’, in David Owen (ed.), *Sociology After Post-Modernism*, London: Sage, 1997.

tradition, still Marxian in origin, that of Émile Durkheim and Marcell Mauss. This sociological tradition widely informed the development of ethnography and was briefly radicalised in the hands of Bataille's circle of dissident surrealists and ethnographers gathered around *Documents*, *The College of Sociology* and to a lesser extent *La Critique Sociale* and *Acephale*.<sup>130</sup> Durkheim sought to develop sociology as a theory of social development across human history and diverse societies. In Durkheim's sociology the concept of classification, social facts, the sacred, division of labour and totality are interarticulated. Structurally the ability to compare different cultures on the basis of sociology permits not only insight into past and remote societies but also critical insight into western society at a point of accelerating modernity in such a way as to render it not exceptional but continuous with prior or parallel human development. Totality for Mauss, in his theory of the gift,

embraces an enormous complex of facts. These in themselves are very complicated. Everything intermingles in them, everything constituting the strictly social life of societies that have preceded our own, even those going back to protohistory. In these 'total' social phenomena, as we propose calling them, all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time – religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and of distribution.<sup>131</sup>

Bataille's circle revised Mauss and Durkheim's theory to insist upon an even more socially dynamic and vivid emphasis. Bataille critically commended Jules Monnerot's work *Les faits sociaux ne sont pas des choses* or 'The moral meaning of sociology'.<sup>132</sup> The article engages Durkheim critically, arguing that his idea of social facts (*fait social*) should not be considered 'things' and further that Durkheim's approach reifies matter, and constitutes a form of idealism. Bataille offers, '[w]hat is sacred, not being based on a logical accord with itself, is not only contradictory with respect to things but, in an undefined way, is in contradiction with itself. [...] What is not a thing (or, formed in the image of a thing, an object of science) is real but at the same time is not real, is impossible and yet is there.'<sup>133</sup> This is a critique with which Adorno seems to concur, at least partially, in the

130 The work of Mauss, as developed by Bataille and other surrealists also informed the much later work of the *Situationist International* who worked both the potlatch and the gift into their own theories social phenomena and practices of ludic political action.

131 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London: Routledge, 2010, p.3.

132 Published in *Critique* (itself founded by Monnerot and Bataille) June 1946.

133 Georges Bataille, 'The Schema of Sovereignty', in *The Bataille Reader*, (Eds.) Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 313–320, p.314.

discussion of Durkheim in his collected lectures on sociology.<sup>134</sup> From the critical recapitulation of Durkheim's theory developed by Theodor Adorno in his *Introduction to Sociology* – a series of lectures published posthumously – a robust critique of human society as presently organised, and of objectivity within it, is presented.

[U]ltimately, despite the disagreement of some sociologists, society is the primary subject of sociology – is contradictory in its essential structure, then it is not so terribly surprising that the discipline which concerns itself with society and social phenomena or social facts, *faits sociaux*, does not itself represent such a continuity.<sup>135</sup>

This, as with many positions expressed within Bataille's sociological articulations, implies an inconsistent or discontinuous sociology. In a phrase which recalls for us Bataille's emphatic study and celebration of heterogeneity, Adorno calls this the 'disturbing inhomogeneity of sociology'.<sup>136</sup> The conflict between the distorting rigour of sociological method and the inchoate state of everyday life upon which sociology depends is picked up by Michel Maffesoli, in a text cited by *Inventory* in the central account of their method. Maffesoli argues that 'rationalism or positivism which have deeply marked sociology have cut themselves off, through their concern for rigour, from whatever warmth and disorganisation existence possesses.' Discerning facts as produced by sociologists and the complex elements of living sociality presented by Durkheim's theorisation, Maffesoli continues, '[t]his produces a gulf between the 'sociological fact' and 'societal fact' [*fait social*] which is, however, its basis.'<sup>137</sup> For, Adorno the primary conflicting forces in modern society were between

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134 Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, (Ed.) Christoph Gödde, (Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott), Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000. The reasons for highlighting Adorno's critique of Durkheim here is not only to point out its accord with that of Bataille and Monnerot, but also to suggest supplementary points: firstly, that there may be further interest in exploring Adorno's enduring and heterodox use of Durkheim's category of '*fait sociaux*' notably (and markedly always in French) in his *Aesthetic Theory*; secondly, that his emphasis on Durkheim's *choisisme* (thingism) alludes to Adorno's critique of reification developed from Marx's critique of political economy, in dialogue with his contemporaries Walter Benjamin and Gyorgy Lukacs; thirdly, that his final remarks in this lecture on Durkheim and Weber's sociology closes on a point relating to 'method' which may elucidate the approach *Inventory* latterly took and the kinds of 'unregimented experience' they sought: '[T]he possibility of sociological knowledge, and especially knowledge not already regulated, which I have called "unregimented experience", is curtailed to an extraordinary degree by the absolute primacy of method.' Ibid., p.79. 'Durkheim took the view that sociology differed essentially from psychology [...] in that real social facts *faits sociaux* cannot be understood, are impenetrable and opaque and ought, as he put it without himself quite realizing the implications of what he said, to be treated as "things", as *choses*; thus, Durkheim's sociology was also called *chosisme*. [...] [T]he hypostasis of social facts which, in a process which became more and more prominent in his work, were used normatively and acknowledged as determining values. These two moments, the impenetrable givenness of *faits sociaux* and their aspect of value, later crystallized out with utmost sharpness in Durkheim's theory of *conscience* (consciousness) and of the *esprit collectif* (collective mind).' Ibid., pp.77–78.

135 Ibid., p.7.

136 Ibid., p.8.

137 Michel Maffesoli, 'The Sociology of Everyday Life (Epistemological Elements)', *Current Sociology*, No.37 (30 June 2016), pp.1–16, p.14.

the principle of order and the principle of progress. And though the derivation of sociology's contradictions depend upon the same source – the contradictions of capitalist society – they are developed differently through *Inventory* because their analysis insisted upon passing through what at first appears close to the seemingly irrational, but in fact is more like the unknown social fact, social knowledge, dwelling out of view and away from of rationalist accounts. With regard to Adorno's criticism of Benjamin's approach to his study, Claydon argues that by 'arming Benjamin's idea of the collective consciousness with a sociological foundation it may allay the fears that Adorno had in this respect.'<sup>138</sup> This would seem to mean for *Inventory* that there is not objective position from which to study an irrational society; that the critique of and exposure as myth of the autonomous sovereign individual at the heart of Enlightenment thought and political institutions, directed critique in two further ways. Towards the forms of collective life in and against society and from a position of collective research – necessarily a culture and communal organ of enunciation. Critical sociology must be critical of its object: society. Critical sociology should direct its criticisms both towards its object and its own method (itself as subject and object). In a society in which reason is functional to an irrational and exploitative order, the irrational, affective, passionate, fierce and lived experience becomes a resource for the project of bringing about a more egalitarian and truthful state of affairs. If a critical perspective must not embody a toxic objectivity, means that only an *interested* perspective can issue research of 'unknowable' social facts.<sup>139</sup> *Inventory's* recapitulation of pre-war sociology is in fact a means to carry out two specific operations, to return to the critical study of society as a totality – to restore this to aesthetic critique, or to restore aesthetic critique as one aspect of a critical and totalising sociology – and secondly to return to the study of the sacred, that is what is apparently contradictory or not recognised yet by science, as an aspect of capitalist social life repressed but must be made accessible through theory and practice.<sup>140</sup>

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138 “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’”, op. cit., p.48.

139 Bataille went on to argue, in the post-war period, that in the 20th Century, the sacred had lost its link with social cohesion, in fact it began to seem even ‘anti-social’ in character. This conjoined with Bataille’s idea of ‘the absence of myth’ explored earlier on in this study. ‘Where it had once been the sacred – or heterogeneous – elements that had established coherence, instead of constituting society and social bonds, it could well now represent nothing else but its subversion.’ George Bataille, ‘The Moral Meaning of Sociology’, (originally published in *Critique*, 1946) in, Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: writings on surrealism*, Ed. and Trans. Michael Richardson, London; New York: Verso, 1994. pp.103-112, p.107.

140 Here Frank Engster’s account of shared elements of critical theory is illuminating in terms of the obfuscation the commodity-form necessarily engenders: ‘the two shared ideas of critique are: first, that the social mediation of the commodity-form is the blind spot in the constitution of economic objectivity and a corresponding subjectivity, and second that the commodity-form does not satisfy an identity between this objectivity and subjectivity. Within this context it is also possible to identify the aforementioned differences between Lukács, Adorno and Sohn-Rethel that show the range of Critical Theory.’ Frank Engster, ‘Subjectivity and its Crisis’, in *History of the Human Sciences*, 2016, Vol. 29 No.2, pp.77–95, p.80.

In many ways, Benjamin's retort to Adorno was already contained in his 1929 essay on surrealism, where he directly addresses the question of 'political materialism', 'anthropological materialism' and objectivity.<sup>141</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Adorno's criticisms are entirely defunct, instead I agree, at least partially, with Giorgio Agamben, whose account of the same correspondence takes Benjamin's side and I think with *Inventory*, and even Adorno in his late writings<sup>142</sup> – that what is finally decisive here is not theory, materialism, or 'total social process', but rather the historical experience which it must inflect and respond to.<sup>143</sup> As we see through the debate between Benjamin and Adorno, both understood 'historical experience' as mediated through 'total social process' and each worked at valid presentations of their interaction and mediation. The question of what method or *praxis* is appropriate under conditions of real abstraction does not easily resolve itself. There is equally no sense in opposing a simplistically revolutionary Benjamin against a 'resigned' Adorno. Both figures maintained complex and often distanced positions vis à vis organised socialist and communist parties and political 'commitment' during their lifetimes, albeit in different ways and different circumstances.<sup>144</sup> This equivocation is clarified by Adorno's late writing, where he seeks more generous resolution of his differences with Benjamin.<sup>145</sup>

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141 'where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, [...] metaphysical materialism, of the brand of Vogt and Bukharin, as is attested by the experience of the Surrealists, and earlier of Hegel, Georg Buchner, Nietzsche, and Rimbaud, cannot lead without rupture to anthropological materialism. There is a residue. The collective is a body, too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto. For the moment, only the Surrealists have understood its present commands.' Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism' in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, (Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter), London: NLB, 1979, p.239.

142 'The measure of such objectivity is not the verification of assertions through repeated testing but rather individual human experience, maintained through hope and disillusionment. Such experience throws its observations into relief through confirmation or refutation in the process of recollection. But its individually synthesized unity, in which the whole nevertheless appears, cannot be distributed and recategorized under the separate persons and apparatuses of psychology and sociology.' 'The Essay as Form', op.cit, p.8. These questions of objectivity and whole, shall be revisited in a full discussion of Adorno's essay and *Inventory's* orientation to it through their editorial, publishing and writing practice in Chapter 5.

143 Giorgio Agamben, 'The baselines of this perspective are not, however, to be found in the "total social process" and "good speculative theory", but "in our own historical experience". Only this has the potential to bring the object to life, detaching it from philology's mythical rigidity.' Giorgio Agamben, 'The Question of Method in Adorno and Benjamin', op. cit, p.134. Nevertheless, we cannot fully trust Agamben's account, which I think substantially distorts Benjamin's views, nor does Agamben seem to have understood Adorno's critique of praxis, he uses the term affirmatively throughout his commentary. See p.99 and p.13

144 Benjamin cut short his own life, 'pursued by fascists'. He did not have to live with the difficult decisions Adorno was exposed to, and his non-exposure to the heteronomy of the either life in the USA or the process of post-war reconstruction in Europe has shielded his legacy from the very different set of problems that arose for Marxists cultural critics in the post-World War II period.

145 'If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical

Herein lies the space for practice which *Inventory* proposed to mine. If, for Adorno, the truth that history is a succession of victors and losers is to be affirmed, then this should not be at the neglect of ‘those things which were not embraced by this dynamic’. A process which presents challenges to thought because such ‘things’ are ‘opaque’ and ‘unassimilated’. *Inventory* therefore oriented themselves via a similarly dialectical view of the authority of category and categorisation presenting both what it could and could not include, that is ‘unassimilated material’. However, were this to be simply a process of the assimilation of as yet ‘unassimilated material’ the process or method could be understood to be scientific, an extension of the domain of science into previously uncharted territory. Instead, *Inventory* displayed a related, highly irreverent, skepticism towards ‘great, immovable, lordly concepts’ and molar political formations of their own period and instead pursued ‘the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic’.<sup>146</sup> What I wish to emphasise is how closely *Inventory*, proceeding ‘methodically unmethodically’<sup>147</sup>, pursued the dynamic tensions between the positions occupied here by Benjamin and Adorno and sought to find in that bewitched spot, room for manoeuvre and movement.

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movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic.’ *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p.151

146 Quoting *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p.151. See also *Inventory*, ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 and 3, 2005 and actions related to this slogan.

147 Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature Vol.1*. (Ed.) Rolf Tiedemann, (Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen), New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p.13.

## Spellbound Investigation

For Benjamin, capitalist conditions influence and change experience and perception itself.<sup>148</sup> Not only is our materialist researcher inside the conditions she is studying, but this conditions her perception and attempts to convey the material studied to a reader. Modern technologised experience makes clear that our perception is limited, not absolute and this informs Benjamin's speculative method or speculative model of experience whereby the conditions of what is possible now are themselves shaped by prior contingency: technological development, division of labour, intensification of the forces of production and so on.<sup>149</sup> Since conditions for experience are themselves determined by prior possibilities – a state of contingency and interdependence, where they equally might not have come into being – the new is equally contingent and possible. Out of this 'historical perspective', change is construed as possible. Benjamin seems to indicate exactly this, in a letter to Adorno.<sup>150</sup>

Giorgio Agamben's account of the correspondence proposes that 'the only materialist point of view is that which radically overcomes the separation of structure and superstructure, because praxis is posited as the only single object in its original cohesion – that is, as "monad"'.<sup>151</sup> Yet this perspective amounts only to an idealist overthrow of capitalist conditions, bridging the gap between an object and the subject of enquiry *immediately* and conflating the monadic object with the 'monadic' praxis of the researcher. Benjamin's account suggests that 'closed facticity' and a form of spellbound investigation can be combined and transform each other through a 'historical perspective'. Benjamin's 'astonishment', could here be considered akin to the surrealist concept of the 'marvellous', but he reserves the task of 'breaking the spell' for philosophy, in a final part of the study under discussion.<sup>152</sup> *Inventory's* approach was to theorise out of objects directly, but to include

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148 'Modern experience, for Benjamin, is characterised by the fact that we experience the limits of our experience – for instance our limited sight in comparison to the camera-eye – as an alienation from the phenomenal world and from the objects of our knowledge.' Anke Hennig, 'Crisis and Critique' in *Anguish Language*, Berlin: Archive Books, 2016, p.103.

149 Ibid., p102 and p.104.

150 'I believe it should say that astonishment is an outstanding object of such an insight. The appearance of closed facticity which attaches to a philological investigation and places the investigator under its spell, fades to the extent that the object is construed in an historical perspective. The base lines of this construction converge in our own historical experience. Thus the object constitutes itself as a monad. In the monad everything that used to lie in mythical rigidity as a textual reference comes alive.' 'Walter Benjamin letter to Theodor W. Adorno Paris, 9 December 1938', op. cit, p.137.

151 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: the Destruction of Experience*, London; New York: Verso, 1993, p.134.

152 'that magical element whose exorcism is reserved for philosophy'. 'Walter Benjamin letter to Theodor W. Adorno Paris, 9 December 1938', op. cit., p.136.



experience in the presentation of those experiences and combine the alienated, distanced mode of reflection of academic or journalism with both wilder *more subjective* accounts and raw material reproduced verbatim in collages or found texts. Rather than philosophy it is equally sociology and experience which are decisive. Nonetheless, the translation of theory, journalism plus subjectivism = materialism was not as simplistically, rather it was a method to be endlessly criticised and developed.<sup>153</sup>

Similarly, Benjamin posed the question of how to carry over ‘a heightened graphicness’ – something achieved by the collage and typographical experiments of dada and surrealist art and poetry – into historical materialist research.

In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness (*Anschaulichkeit*) to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.<sup>154</sup>

This process of construction would be for Benjamin a kind of constellation, which is not the identical with totality, but rather an image in which elements of the totality are inscribed. For Benjamin, ‘ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.’<sup>155</sup> Ideas map and shape objects, representing them as a coherent picture, even a ‘world picture’, to use Hegel’s term. But, Benjamin’s picture insists not on its progressive inevitability, but instead its difficulty and its momentary, instantaneous and contingent nature. In this emphasis on the historicity of perception and environment Benjamin is close to the original concerns of critical theory as set out by Max Horkheimer upon his assumption of directorship of the Frankfurt School for Social Research.<sup>156</sup> Objects are perceived in their historicity, in their historical associations

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153 *Inventory* contributor Matthew Hyland, for example, discusses in Benjaminian terms the ways in which in mainstream journalism ‘shock-engendered non-experience (*Erlebnis*) [...] itself becomes a source of authority, notably in contemporary journalism.’ And ‘The most “trustworthy” discourse about wars or other presumably world-historic events is the personal testimony of “frontline reporters” who fly in and describe their shock impressions unburdened by long-term involvement or analytical distance.’ Matthew Hyland, ‘I Sighed, So Deeply’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.26–36, p.29.

154 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, (N2,6)6, quoted in “‘Dialectics at a Standstill” Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*’, op. cit, p.931.

155 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London; New York: Verso, 1998, p.34.

156 ‘The objects we perceive in our surroundings—cities, villages, fields, and woods—bear the mark of having been worked on by man [. . .] Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life-process as it has evolved over the millennia. The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity.’ Max Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and critical theory’, in *Max*

and in their openness to historical transformation. For *Inventory*, the consistent subject/object of investigation from ‘The Profound Purchase’ through to the entire run of the journal is ‘the object as organised by capital’.<sup>157</sup> This approach facilitates renewed perception, new knowledge for its investigator and in its readers.<sup>158</sup> Benjamin’s method, his form of investigation, is distinguished from ‘calm contemplat[ion]’. It is above all an investigation in which something is risked by the investigator.<sup>159</sup>

## Method and The Essay as Form

The essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality.<sup>160</sup>

*Inventory* reference the idea of the ‘essay as form’ in their ‘Notes to Contributors’ and in their final editorial statement. Here I primarily reflect upon the way in which this formulation relates to Adorno’s articulation of critical theory, because for *Inventory* the essay as form resolved the dispute between Adorno and Benjamin on the side of the generation of cognitive fragments through partially subjective and objective forms of writing and research. But, it is worth bearing in mind also the essay form’s specific resonances with the ethnographic tradition *Inventory* involved themselves with. Michele Richman suggests this leans upon a longer tradition harking all the way back to Montaigne’s essay on the cannibal, she claims that such ‘[c]ultural comparisons fostered a mode of anthropological thinking that allowed thinkers from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment to circumvent censorship and address controversial issues.’<sup>161</sup> Robert Hullot-Kentor discusses Adorno’s approach to the essay as form and the titling of his works in terms of formal recursion and self-sufficiency: ‘These titles claim that the work they contain is the presentation of the object itself. [...] In the title, then, as in the work, the mediation of concept and presentation establishes a unity of thought and object.’<sup>162</sup> The choice of title: *Inventory* – which came to stand for themselves as an

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Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, (Trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others), New York: Continuum, (1937) 2002, pp.88-243.

157 Simon Neville, ‘God’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.33-34, p.34.

158 ‘There could be no apter evocation of the disquiet that marks the beginning of any critique of history worthy to be called dialectical, which must renounce a calm, contemplative attitude towards its subject to become aware of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past is found with precisely this present. Walter Benjamin, ‘Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian’, in *One Way Street*, op. cit, p.350.

159 Ibid.

160 ‘The Essay as Form’, op. cit., p.16.

161 Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

162 Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p.125.

exhibiting group (regardless of the changing roster of contributors), the title and subject of the journal (again regardless of the changing roster of contributors) and the object of the journal itself – presents itself as ‘a unity of thought and object’.<sup>163</sup> The ‘inventory’ produced by the journal *Inventory*, as I have already proposed in relation to Benjamin’s ‘Moscow Diary’, was a speculative object – one built to contain contradictions but not tame them – an ‘incomplete’ totality, a catalogue or index of what *is*, but constructed so as to encompass what *isn’t* yet, or is no longer – that which is subjective alongside that which is objective – that which is found, lost and collected: ‘subjective and objective elements deliberately coagulated.’<sup>164</sup> Here the concept of ‘inventory’ collapses into the analyses published within *Inventory*, ‘the title as name is to be a microcosm of the work.’<sup>165</sup> *Inventory* as *name* describes both container and process. The name is mimetic of the ‘contradictory unity’, or ‘confused totality’ of capitalist society, that ‘moving contradiction’ itself.<sup>166</sup> Yet, if this appears to foreclose on conceptual development by delivering an already complete unity, this is not so for the *Inventory* is to be remade with each issue with each analysis proffered and every diverse reception by each singular reader.<sup>167</sup>

## Postmodern Ethnography

Anthropologist-Steven Webster has attempted to approach the debate between Benjamin and Adorno in such a way as to bring about insights into the methods of postmodern anthropology. In Webster’s account, the forms of cultural relativism adopted by anthropology from post-structuralist theory tended to respond to the close association of anthropology and ethnography with an imperial past, but have eschewed the concrete and instead resorted to

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163 *Things Beyond Resemblance*, op. cit., p.125.

164 *Inventory*, ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.6.

165 *Things Beyond Resemblance*, op. cit., p.125.

166 Quotations respectively from Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Valéry’s Deviations’, *Notes to Literature*, Vol.1, op. cit., pp.137–173, p.146; Damian Abbott, ‘Paper Assembly’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.78-83, p.78 and Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Trans. Martin Nicolaus) New York: Vintage, (1848) 1973, p.706.

167 Some of the associations with the essay form made are: ‘resist the easy formulas of categorisation’ (p.5), ‘erode the sclerosis of thought, idea and action.’ ) p.5; ‘to act as a supple catalyst’ (p.6); ‘walk an uneasy path between our desire to achieve and maintain our autonomy and our wish to realise and communicate our ideas’ (p.6); ‘never intentionally seeking a finished “product” (in every sense of the word)’ (p.6); ‘we conceive every arena and activity of life to be worthy a creative critical analysis – and all these areas are already political’ (p.7) ‘We have never been orthodox in anything, because we are defiant, contrary, autodidactic, amateur, rigorous, stupid, slipshod, conniving, ETGOW, obsequious and ignoble and we refuse to confirm your beliefs!’ (p.7) [ETGOW is early net/gamer slang for easy to get on with]’, *We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs* op. cit., p.6.

theory as an indeterminate escape from this tarnished past.<sup>168</sup>

Writing in 1970, Jairus Banaji has discussed two specific consequences of imperialism on the development of the discipline: the near extinction of anything resembling the ‘primitive totality’ which was social anthropology’s traditional object of study and the transformation of social relations in the wake of a dissolution of the ‘economic and political monopoly of the West’ and eruption of revolutionary and national independence struggles making traditional modes of field work less and less viable, among a number of other internal tendencies contributing to a ‘crisis in British anthropology’.<sup>169</sup>

## Crisis of Anthropology

For Banaji, this crisis was not just specific to the British variant but a ‘global crisis of anthropology’.<sup>170</sup> Nonetheless, the specificities of the crisis of British Anthropology validated a turn away from functionalist approaches in which “‘structure” was defined to exclude contradictions’ and towards a re-engagement with the structuralist anthropology developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss which drew ‘its originality from the unconscious nature of collective phenomena’ and ‘developed from the notion that social facts can be treated, like words, as part of a system of communication.’<sup>171</sup> As a result anthropology became more self-conscious of its own textual production, and even literary legacy. According to Webster, anthropologists turned to theory, but away from practice.

the hermeneutic or semiological form of the ethnographic text becomes an implicit theory of the social process described, and this theory furthermore assumes the theoretical problematic of cultural relativism. Or, to put the problem from the point of view of postmodernism, writing practice is no longer estranged from theory; it *is* theory. [...] This flattening of theory into practice is characteristic of postmodern art.<sup>172</sup>

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168 ‘The ambivalence expresses specific histories: in anthropological terms, the new attention to ethnographic form was precipitated by the cultural relativity and skepticism characteristic of the discipline, perhaps further motivated by awareness of professional implication in colonialism and the emergence of new states from old empires.’ ‘The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography’, op. cit, p.266

169 Jairus Banaji, ‘The Crisis of British Anthropology’, *New Left Review*, 1/64, November-December 1970, pp.71-85.

170 ‘British anthropology is not only stagnating as a theory, it is also threatened as a practice. In addition to its own specific crisis – the failure to constitute itself as a science – it is affected by the global crisis of anthropology.’ Jairus Banaji, ‘The Crisis of British Anthropology’, op. cit, p.85.

171 Jairus Banaji, ‘The Crisis of British Anthropology’, op. cit, p.75 and p.76.

172 Ibid., p.268.

On the surface it would appear that Webster's accusations could apply to *Inventory*. For artists educated in the UK in 1970s and 1980s the group practice and journal *Art and Language* was a hegemonic example of a practice that had not just brought art closer to theory but had made art theory and theory art. Notwithstanding the influence of this example on the *Inventory*'s members, and its existence as a model or archetype for the form the journal took, it is quite clear that the group chose to approach *Art and Language*'s problematic quite differently. Rather than dissolving theory and art, *Inventory* was characterised throughout by a rejection of art, at least in its present state of development. Rather, they sought to occupy the standpoint of ethnography and sociology 'fiercely', that is to estrange it from itself. One of the ways they achieved this is through an identification of the methodological distinctions and quandries of the Adorno-Benjamin debate. Like Benjamin they attempt to 'theorise directly out of the objects of cultural experience'. And in that attempt, there was a close identification with Benjamin's suppression or sublation of theory. The question of whether Webster's accusation that in postmodern practices, 'writing practice is no longer estranged from theory; it is theory', can be asked therefore of both Benjamin and *Inventory*. However, the precise mediation of writing and theory, or upon writing by theory and vice versa is a little more complex, even passing further into estrangement, than Webster's straightforward view of *writing becoming theory* i.e. assuming the new and proper identity of theory. Instead, *Inventory* and Benjamin assumed forms *beneath* theory: travel journalism, the essay, the glossary, yet these were to carry a 'secret cargo' (sublated theory).<sup>173</sup> And this shall be further probed in the final chapter 6 of this study in terms of the specific determinations of the form *Inventory*'s writing assumed.

*Inventory* appear to have been acutely aware of this crisis of anthropology right from the very beginning of their project, indeed the practice they invented was a critique of contemporary anthropology. Adam Scrivener, who as a librarian at SOAS in the years running up to and following the inception of the journal, therefore the *Inventory* member closest to ethnographic discourse, broached some of these issues in his essay 'Elephant', albeit on the idiosyncratic terms developed out of the particular fusion of Bataille and Benjamin I have been attempting here to specify.

Everyday practices can operate in any number of ways which are neither pessimistic nor utopian, rather, they oscillate between the banal and fantastic which is at once utopian and accursed. But ultimately it is not a way of 'making'. It is a way of expending.

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<sup>173</sup> 'we wanted to adopt and misuse genres of writing that have been trodden on by everyone from journalists to academics.' *Inventory* quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.35.

Elephant is a space which has become weakened and made available to multitude of voices, an orality not of the silent, transgressive, ironic or poetic activity of readers but of radical unproductive expenditures.<sup>174</sup>

On these terms, Scrivener explicitly rejects the deconstructionist/post-structuralist view of culture as text. This is framed in firmly in the Bataillean/Maussian terms of an anti-productivist reading. In this sense it also touches on the margins of a problem of post-Marxism, namely Baudrillard's theory of the political economy of the sign.<sup>175</sup> However, the implication made here, is that *Inventory* as a group and as individuals attempt to negotiate intricacies of post-structuralist theory in order to make space for forms of agency for the subjects of the production of space in everyday life which are at odds with the conflation of theory with practice, or the position of the researcher, or theoretician, with the ethnographic subject. Scrivener frames this effort firmly within a critique of such moves in contemporary ethnography, and locates in them a 'crisis'.

This also relates to the crisis of ethnographic writing itself. It is part of the same scriptural economy which cannot grasp the orality of the everyday. It will always escape it. Ethnography has yet to push itself toward an ethnographic writing which acknowledges writing as limit experience.<sup>176</sup>

The question of 'orality' can be seen to be developed by *Inventory* only in their practice of writing and collating glosses of everyday speech and practices in the Glossary section of the journal. There is not another essay by the group which tackles this concept in fuller detail with regard to ethnographic or post-structuralist theory.<sup>177</sup> There is also a call here for ethnographic writing to distance itself from theory and rather consider itself experience. This is in keeping with the French tradition as practised by Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, where instead of validating the experience of others and attempting to inscribe it in western systems of classification, the confrontation with cultural others and foreign landscapes is transformational for the subject

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174 Adam Scrivener, 'Elephant', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1 1995, p.35. Underlining reproduced from the original.

175 A critical summation of Baudrillard's anti-productivist critique of Marx is provided in *Inventory* by Garisson Clarke, 'A Christmas Gift', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1, 1997, pp.24-40. 'Elephant', op. cit., discussed above provides some critical remarks on the limits of Baudrillard's account of the political economy of the sign.

176 'Elephant', op. cit., fn#35, p.38.

177 Paul Claydon's essay on 'Oracular Architecture' is suggestive, in its approach towards the relation of speech to built space in cosmological, religio-philosophical and ethnographic terms but this is related primarily to the early 20th Century writings of Nietzsche, Kafka, Benjamin and Julian Huxley. Paul Claydon, 'Oracular Architecture', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000.

describing it.<sup>178</sup> It is also an indication, that shall be developed in the course of this study, that properly ethnographic writing would take the form of writing as ‘limit experience’. This, especially in the publication of ‘found texts’, without commentary or analysis, is as far from recognisable ‘theory’ as any writing could be. Nonetheless, as we have seen, theory was not anathema to *Inventory* at all, the texts published in the journal are replete with rich references across modern and contemporary ‘theory’. The specificity and critical interrogation of theory is retained but a critical gap or boundary is produced between the direct subject experience of ‘things’, stimuli, and their critical interpretation and classification. Theory as finality is interrupted by the plurality of contributions to the journal and the constitution of it as a serial form made up of discreet but connected ‘issues’.

## Proliferating Taxonomies

One of Webster’s most forceful claims is that through its identification with surrealism, postmodern anthropology and ‘contemporary ethnography can be seen as an historical sequel to the intentions of the aesthetic avant-garde, now attempted in domains of social science rather than art.’<sup>179</sup> Rather than seeking to remove itself further from its object, *Inventory*’s adoption of a ‘fiercely sociological’ gaze instead borrows the supposed objectivity and interdisciplinarity of sociology and attempts to bring it closer to everyday life. Reacting against the professionalising tendencies of the contemporary art scene surrounding them, they sought to deprofessionalise aspects of anthropological analysis just as they were themselves falling out of use in the profession. If Banaji, Scrivener and Webster’s arguments are true, each positing different crises and dramatic shifts in direction in anthropology, *Inventory* can be understood as adopting the tools of sociological analysis just as anthropologists were eschewing them. But, crucially, I do not think this involved a strong identification with the professional anthropologist, rather *Inventory* took the position of the subjects of that sociology, as if they had stolen the tools of its authority in the field. For the group the objectivity of sociology was founded upon a contradictory object. Rather than resolve or overcome

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178 Hal Foster admits us much but also raises some problems with this practice: ‘it may be, as many critics claim today, that this self-othering is crucial to a revised understanding of anthropology and politics alike; or, more circumspectly, that in conjunctures such as the surrealist one the troping of anthropology as auto-analysis (as in Leiris) or social critique (as in Bataille) is culturally transgressive, even politically significant. But there are obvious dangers here as well. Then as now such self-othering easily passes into self-absorption, in which the project of ‘ethnographic self-fashioning’ becomes the practice of philosophical narcissism.’ Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ in George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Eds.), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1995) 302–308, p.304.

179 ‘The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography’, op. cit, p.275. In this passage Webster cites James Clifford’s essay ‘Ethnographic Surrealism’ as initiating movement in this direction in the field of ethnography.



this contradiction, or reject the discipline completely, they instead sought to occupy the space of contradiction, to get as ‘close-up’ as possible. They self-consciously sought to study their own experience, as it was transformed through investigation. The approach directly attacked two elements of social anthropology: firstly, they confronted the ‘image of the primitive totality – a compact, self-enclosed totality revolving endlessly in the same circuit’; they transposed this image, borrowed from social anthropology previously applied exclusively to ‘primitive society’, to a complex and heterogeneous late-20th century society; in doing so they challenged, ‘the now classic functionalist thesis that even the most apparently subversive rituals merely reinforce the social order’; secondly, by developing a combination of parodic field research and classification *Inventory* performatively satirised anthropology’s ‘*proliferating technical taxonomies and definitional exercises*’, itself the indication of weakness and fallibility in the discipline.<sup>180</sup> Instead of claiming a position of objectivity vis-a-vis the classified phenomena, *Inventory*’s editors proposed this as a project of self-understanding and invention within a framework which celebrated the contradictoriness and fragility of its own epistemological architecture. The group specified their own attitude to the tools of analysis. ‘It is a matter of that which can be made to come about by means which are immediately available, close to hand, adaptable or possessing transformative potential.’<sup>181</sup> This may sound trite and classically postmodern, suggesting a collage of techniques of an anti-technological and vernacular leaning. However understood as a methodology, or even a kind of technology used to generate a practice this form of self-invention takes on a more serious status. It is as we have seen highly discerning and specific to an esoteric current of historical materialism which sought to develop a critique immanent to commodity fetishism and oriented to practice.

In Webster’s account of correspondences between postmodernist art and anthropology textual hermeneutics and relativism take the place of direct engagement with forms of representation.<sup>182</sup> *Inventory*’s own investigation involved verbatim presentation of the texts of others, ‘found texts’, often written by the homeless and insane. This might be thought as a complement to Benjamin’s own ‘wide-eyed presentation of mere facts’. Yet, these were

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180 Needham, ‘Introduction’ to Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, (ed.) Needham (Cohen & West 1963); Banaji’s italics, quoted in Jairus Banaji, ‘The Crisis of British Anthropology’, op. cit., p.80.

181 ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, op. cit., p.5.

182 ‘Whereas aesthetic modernist works struggle with the antinomies of representation, postmodernist works avoid representation as a positivist metaphysics, treating their subject as pure simulacra or images without originals. The postmodernist aspects of these ethnographic forms, then, extend from the hermeneutic representation that, through reflexivity, simply avoids positivist forms of representation, to the deconstructionist evocation, performance, or therapeutic exercise that rejects all representation as illusory. In one way or another, postmodernist ethnographic forms thereby seek to integrate with, rather than represent, the social practices that are their object. This integral relationship with practice is, at the same time, their form and their theory.’ ‘The Historical Materialist Critique of Surrealism and Postmodernist Ethnography’, op. cit., p.293.

framed within a container which elsewhere rippled with intense exploration, reflection of and conceptualisation of contemporary experience. In postmodern hermeneutics, the text is the totality. Adorno himself used the metaphor of sociology being a thief in the house of philosophy positively.<sup>183</sup> If I might in turn appropriate the metaphor, then *Inventory* effected a counter-appropriation upon sociology or anthropology in order to rescue, activate through practice and expose to new objects insights and techniques which might otherwise vanish or decay through disuse. In *Inventory*, the journal, the serial anthologising of text takes the form of an incomplete totality that rivals, competes with and draws its objects from the actual total social process, it pretends to comprehensiveness and comprehension, but wilfully or valiantly fails. *Inventory* was marked by both the suppression of analysis and its realisation, by an activation of the role of the observer who is both in the crowd and observer of it.

## Critical Theory With or Without Mimesis

Peter Osborne has indicated two significant contributions to western Marxist attempts to translate Adorno's thought, that of Jürgen Habermas and Frederic Jameson, both show a profound discomfort with 'the centrality of mimesis to Adorno's thought'.<sup>184</sup> Osborne argues that this difficult concept cannot be marginalised, rather is crucial to not only the *Dialectic*, but also two other major works.

mimesis is given an explicit theoretical definition in *Aesthetic Theory*, at least with regard to its result, as 'the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and non-positated other' – more of a definition of truth in representation than of narrative as such. Second, to say that mimesis is 'never argued; is to ignore that in one sense all three books under discussion [*Negative Dialectics*, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Aesthetic Theory*], as a whole, constitute little less than a single massive argument for it.<sup>185</sup>

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183 Adorno writes: 'I would be inclined to acknowledge the comparison and to interpret positively the function [Heidegger] gave sociology for philosophy. For the house, this big house, has long since decayed in its foundations and threatens not only to destroy all those inside it, but to cause all the things to vanish which are stored within it, much of which is irreplaceable.' Theodor W. Adorno, 'Die Aktualität der Philosophie', *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. 1 (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1973, translated as 'The Actuality of Philosophy', (Trans. B. Snow), *Telos* No.31 (1977), p.130. Quoted in Stewart Martin, op. cit., p.26.

184 Peter Osborne, 'A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno', *New German Critique*, No. 56, Special Issue on Theodor W. Adorno (Spring - Summer, 1992), pp.171-192, p.176. This rather broad characterisation can be both supported and further complicated by Stewart Martin's discussion of Habermas' presentation of mimesis 'as generating a paradox for Critical Theory'. 'Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy' op. cit., p.24

185 Peter Osborne, 'A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno', *New German Critique*, No.56, Special Issue

Adorno's theory of mimesis is crucially used by Habermas to propose the impossibility of critical theory, but in fact the centrality of mimesis is precisely the obstacle to Habermas' rationalisation and normalisation of the Frankfurt School's work.<sup>186</sup>

*Inventory* journal's editors recovered mimesis as a critical category, refusing the view of enlightenment's instrumentalisations as totalising and instead considering the mimetic faculty, like myth, as something subdued but still vital and liable to erupt in human and animal cultures. *Inventory* is replete with mimetic imagery, yet this is, on occasion, also framed in more critical terms, for example in a sticker project they produced the statement: 'ironic mimesis is not critique, it is the mentality of a slave.'<sup>187</sup> Crude mimesis, of the kind indulged by post-conceptual art was not the kind of mimesis *Inventory* were interested in.<sup>188</sup> *Inventory*'s indices, lists and definitions do not play dumb before the sublimity of systems but rather force these forms to yield their intimate entanglement and management of human experience.

Adorno's formulations around mimesis, art and knowledge here become crucial in understanding *Inventory* as at once a practice which eschewed art in order to arrive at forms of knowledge production which use art's means in order to arrive at 'knowledge' beyond the strictures of constituted 'knowledge'.<sup>189</sup>

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on Theodor W. Adorno (Spring - Summer, 1992), pp.171-192, respective quotations are from p.176 and p.177. Osborne continues: 'To be perplexed by its [mimesis's] apparent preexistence of Adorno's texts means to be perplexed by either the philosophical prehistory of the concept (its place in the history of philosophy prior to Adorno's modification of it) or Adorno's claim for its objectivity as a natural-historical, ontological, or at the very least, anthropological category.' p.176.

186 See 'Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy', op. cit. Peter Osborne indicates similar flaws in the work of Frederic Jameson in Peter Osborne, 'A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno', *New German Critique*, No. 56, Special Issue on Theodor W. Adorno (Spring-Summer, 1992), pp.171-192.

187 *Inventory* sticker published as part of *Smash this Puny Existence*, Bookworks, 1999.

188 *Inventory*'s sticker can be construed as an implicit attack on artist Carey Young, with whom *Inventory* exhibited alongside at Beck's Futures, who had produced around this time a series of performances mimicking business culture and rhetoric.

189 'Art is a stage in the process of what Max Weber called the disenchantment of the world, and it is entwined with rationalization; this is the source of all of art's means and methods of production; technique that disparages its ideology inheres in this ideology as much as it threatens it because art's magical heritage stubbornly persisted throughout art's transformations. Yet art mobilizes technique in an opposite direction than does domination. The sentimentality and debility of almost the whole tradition of aesthetic thought is that it has suppressed the dialectic of rationality and mimesis immanent to art. This persists in the astonishment over the technical work of art as if it had fallen from heaven: The two points of view are actually complementary. Nevertheless, the cliché about the magic of art has something true about it. The survival of mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as "rational." For that to which the mimetic comportment responds is the telos of knowledge, which art simultaneously blocks with its own categories. Art completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge and thereby once again impairs its character as knowledge, its univocity. Art threatens to be pulled apart because magic, which art secularizes, actually refuses this process, while in the midst of secularization the essence of magic sinks to the level of a mythological vestige, to superstition. What today emerges as the crisis of art, as its new quality, is as old as art's concept. How an artwork deals with this antinomy determines its possibility and quality. Art cannot fulfill its concept. This strikes each and every one of its works, even the highest, with an ineluctable imperfectness that repudiates the idea of perfection toward which artworks must aspire.' Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), London & New York: Continuum, 1997. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London; New York: Continuum Press, 1997, p.54.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer consider mimesis closely entwined with the development of language: ‘language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and the same time something other than itself, identical and not identical.’<sup>190</sup> For *Inventory*, as for Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin, mimesis is closely connected to linguistic capacity and the mutability of meaning: in language something can be a thing and an agent, an object and a subject, and this, as Adorno and Horkheimer specify is tied up with a dialectic of identity and non-identity.<sup>191</sup> Playing with ‘categories and conventions’ means encouraging elasticity in the procedures of naming: identity and recognition. Therefore the attack on such ‘conventions’ proceeds not through an attempt to annul, but by copying and imitating wrongly, to encourage slippage between the terms and their rigidity. In *Inventory*’s ‘glossaries’ linguistic ‘signs’ pass through experiential content to become playful, iterative or merely ridiculous. Language carries and is not separable from sensuous knowledge of the things it describes. Moreover science cannot free itself mediation through language, its attempts to do so distort its promise of truth. The problem for *Inventory*, raised by Adorno and Horkheimer’s account of mimesis, is whether such attempts to reintroduce mimesis amount to, on the one hand, a renewing also ‘blind subordination to domination or myth’, or on the other, by rashly fusing theory and practice, constructing genuine moments of ‘self-reflection’, or, instead, ‘mere pseudo-activity’? *Inventory*’s method does not make the same movement as Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory, ‘toward philosophy’, but by reiterating the critique of instrumental reason operative in ‘science’ and renouncing ‘art’ their practice reintroduces experience through an ‘anxious science’ which embraces ‘contradiction’ and ‘heresy’.<sup>192</sup> What is transformed in this process, as per Benjamin, is not only the object but the subject itself: the subject has become possessed by and possessive of a ‘bewitched objectivity’, “‘around an object which is never explicable in its totality’”.<sup>193</sup> For *Inventory*, this form of investigation forms a ‘multi-sensorial analysis’, ‘offering a tactile, bodily, nervous, materialism.’<sup>194</sup> Yet, this was not, as in Agamben’s analysis above, a materialism which amounted to an overcoming of ‘contradictions’. Instead the group suggested, ‘rather we would actively affirm such a dynamic tension: a positive play of aggressive forces.’<sup>195</sup> Retaining at all times a tension between knowledge

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190 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.15 quoted in *Ibid.*, p.124.

191 The category of mimesis remains crucial from differentiating both Adorno and Benjamin from the return to neo-Kantianism with which the late Frankfurt School can be characterised, and to a certain extent piloted readings in the Anglophone academy throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

192 ‘Thus we see ourselves as heretics and not as ‘political artists’. ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, op. cit., p.6 and on contradiction: ‘We have little in the way of method, in fact what there is of it leads to paradox and contradiction.’ ‘Do You Feel Crushed’, op. cit., p.4.

193 *Ibid.*, p.8 and quoting Mafessoli, p.6.

194 *Ibid.*, p.5.

195 ‘Do You Feel Crushed’, op. cit., p.4.

and not-knowing, it is in this light that *Inventory* enabled the embodiment, as subjects, of forms of ‘contaminated analysis’.<sup>196</sup> Analysis is contaminated by its proximity to its object. Subjects open to change encountered unknown objects, therefore becoming ‘contaminated’ by them. In his study of ‘The Mystique of Numbers’, Scrivener spells out his method in totally Benjaminian terms.

In a sense I would like to attempt to extract various fragments of the [...] phenomena and crystallize them into an analysis that is at once, a work of imagination, experience, and theory which, I believe, characterises *Inventory*’s approach to things.<sup>197</sup>

The contradictions demarcated through states of mimesis, constituted for the group a difficult space – a ‘bewitched spot’ – through which they sought to create movement and ‘play’ in the place of resignation. Criticising Kant, Gillian Rose argues that ‘[t]o establish ‘validity’ as a realm of reality *sui generis* means that the act of judging is distinguished from the state of affairs which the judgement affirms.’<sup>198</sup> *Inventory*, appear to intuit such critiques of Kantian judgment, by committing themselves to risking transformation by the object of their analyses, they retained an approach to phenomena which did not institutionalise nor grant a false autonomy to ‘facts’ or ‘appearances’.<sup>199</sup>

Habermas’ aversion to mimesis has a direct bearing on his theorisation of publicity. In the kind of publishing in which *Inventory* were involved, that is self-publishing, neither permission to publish, nor permission to reproduce copyrighted images or text, were observed. In Habermas’ account of the public sphere and his theory of communicative reason validity is established through a relation of reciprocity with developing institutions. In chapter 2 I mentioned James Holstun’s description of print as ‘a medium more of *association* than of hierarchical *appeal*.’<sup>200</sup> If we consider the ways in which print as a reproductive media, a medium of association through reproduction, reference, recognition and even mis-recognition we can begin to understand how a theory of mimesis in the context of a self-published print project such as *Inventory* might bring into dynamic relation both thought and the object of its presentations.

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196 *Inventory*, ‘Press release for *Inventory* Vo.1 No.1’. Chelsea School of Art Archives, *Inventory* Archive, undated (c.1994-5).

197 Adam Scrivener, ‘The Mystique of Numbers’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.42-54, p.42.

198 *Hegel Contra Sociology*, op. cit., p.34.

199 Rose mobilises Adorno’s critique of Kant and Neo-Kantianism against Lukács, Popper and Habermas, yet she makes reservations about this position because she claims ‘Adorno’s thought became methodical too’, and that this ‘represents a return to neo-Kantianism on his part.’ *Ibid.*, p.35.

200 *Ibid.*

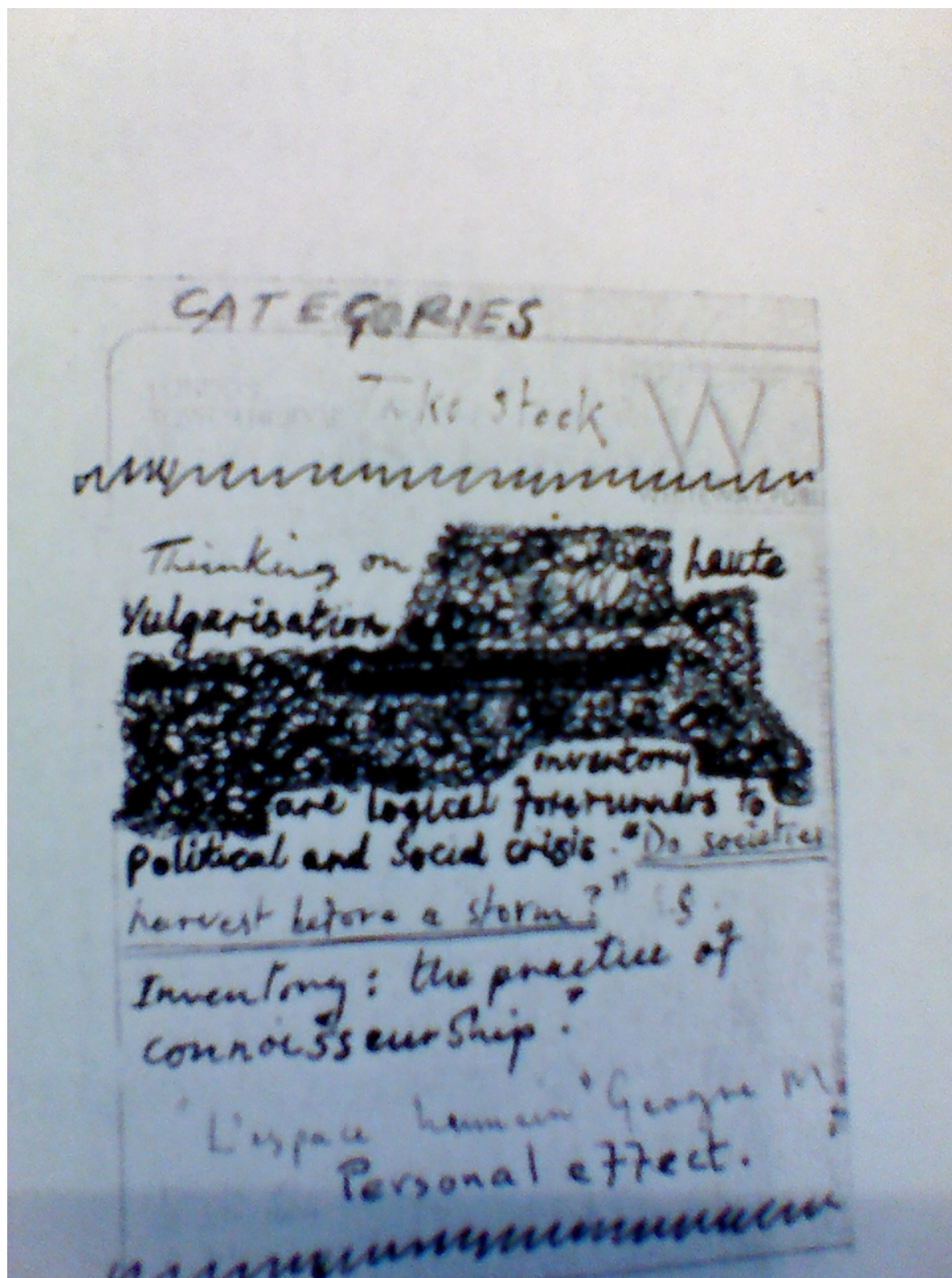


Image: Tony deSilva, 'Categories', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, p.77

## Crisis Theory and Critical Theory

An additional factor modifying *Inventory*'s interpretation of Adorno's criticisms of Benjamin is their own sense of impending cultural crisis. Since Adorno, following Horkheimer, admitted that 'mass ego' did exist in human society, but only at moments of catastrophe, *Inventory* point out that Benjamin's method was developed very much out of and to address crisis conditions.<sup>201</sup> For *Inventory* survival in Thatcher's UK in the 1980s presented the social catastrophe of deindustrialisation and unemployment – a destruction of both use values and human lives – which conditioned the landscape and shaped wish images for the era in which *Inventory* editors and contributors grew up as young adults. The groups' own self-conception as 'logical forerunners to political and social crisis' legitimated the application of such categories to the society in which they lived.<sup>202</sup> A key aspect of Jürgen Habermas' revision of critical theory is his claim that Adorno had dispensed with sociology and shed its insights in order to move instead towards aesthetic critique and philosophy as a form of compensation.<sup>203</sup> Habermas' own theory of 'communicative action' has been questioned extensively for its idealism and status as apologetic vis a vis forms of economic colonisation of democratic form. Nonetheless its critics permit that only *in crisis conditions* 'does communicative power become potentially transformable into political power.'<sup>204</sup> *Inventory* appear in agreement with such an analysis, but in such a way that obviously inverts and wrecks Habermas' theory since their theory of political power is invariably an insurrectionary one, destructive not formative of bourgeois institutions. If for Habermas, the validity of the liberal democratic system is retained even if it coincides with its ideal of democratic access only infrequently, for *Inventory*, only in collective action (an emergency, riot or revolutionary situation) does the truth of constituent power overcome the restraints imposed by liberal democracy in order to articulate the truth of this condition.<sup>205</sup>

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201 "“Botanizing on the Asphalt”", op. cit. See also Theodor W. Adorno, 'Adorno to Benjamin Hornberg, Black Forest, 2 August 1935', *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.113.

202 Quote from Tony deSilva, 'Categories', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.76–77, p.77. *Inventory*'s perception of crisis is discussed in Chapter 1 of this study.

203 See 'Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy', op. cit., p.21 and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992, pp.127-8.

204 Deborah Cook, 'The Talking Cure in Habermas's Republic', *New Left Review* No.12, Nov-Dec, 2001, pp.135-151, p.141.

205 A position most clearly explored in 'The Last Days of London', op. cit., Adam Scrivener, 'Laughter', op. cit. and *The Counsel of Spent*, op. cit.



## ‘Lost’ Sociological Foundations

Self-consciously situating themselves in a moment of economic, cultural and epistemological crisis, *Inventory* developed from the methodological debate between Benjamin and Adorno (itself developed amidst the strictures of exile and the rise of fascism in the interwar period) a proposition which retrieved a ‘lost’ sociological element, albeit in such critical terms as can be understood as a détournement or an ostensible disguise. This sociological element is ‘lost’ in the sense of Jürgen Habermas’ accusation towards Adorno and because the sociological element of surrealism was mostly suppressed in surrealism’s post-war reception, especially in Britain and the US, as an exclusively artistic movement.<sup>206</sup> These ‘sociological foundations’, were be drawn from *Inventory*’s fiercely sociological interpretation of surrealism – via the tradition of Durkheim and Mauss radicalised in the 1920s and 1930s by Bataille, Leiris, Caillois and others – but also the sociology of Georg Simmel, a figure who exacted a strong but sometimes contested influence on both Benjamin and Adorno.<sup>207</sup> Drawing from Ralph Leck’s recovery of Simmel as a ‘precursor’ to critical theory I wish to propose that *Inventory* anticipated Leck’s approach by foregrounding Simmel in their critical appropriation of the legacy of the Frankfurt School and Bataille, and in building a theoretico-political practice which would respond to and defeat the limits of postmodern ‘entrapment’.<sup>208</sup> This then is another point of tension, or sequence of points, which *Inventory* sought to occupy and animate, whilst equally eschewing mass politics, ‘we refuse to confirm your beliefs’ they sought to investigate those collective phenomena in which collectivity and individual experience would meet and struggle.

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206 A tendency criticised in *Inventory*, ‘An Impossible Project: a Fierce Sociology of the Supermarket’, *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.150-161, p.151. This account also has an opposite but equally relevant bearing on the reception of the practice of Mass Observation in the UK as a kind of state sociology and the reception of Bataille, as discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, who has gradually been integrated as a firstly a surrealist and latterly a philosopher.

207 See above.

208 Leck’s stated purpose was to ‘augment the pre-existing history of German critical theory by beginning with a new historical premise: during the Wilhelmine period, it was Simmel, not Weber, who was proclaimed the philosopher of the Left avant-garde.’ Leck, op. cit., p.110.

The elements of *Inventory*'s methodology, reprised from Bataille, Adorno and Benjamin and transformed, have been effectively established above. What has also been made clear from what I have attempted to explicate is that this methodology is without (Hegelian) telos, and this was necessarily so, for Benjamin and Adorno after Simmel, understood historical time not as diachronic but as 'discontinuous'.<sup>209</sup> Progress was therefore questionable and redemption was far from guaranteed but depended upon determinate acts of recovering the past for a revolutionary present. *Inventory*'s sorting system of these 'wastes, residues and traces' was constituted by the 'inventory' formed by the journal itself: an endlessly shifting vehicle of decategorisation and recategorisation filtered through individual and collective experience. What characterised this practice was not 'a certain glee', but a carefully poised attitude of joy in 'finding' and a certain melancholic mourning absolved through 'forgetting'.

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209 *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, op. cit., fn.114, p.229.



Image: *Inventory*, Flyer for 'Requiem for the Empty Quarter', The Approach, January–March, 2002

In *Inventory* there is an acknowledgement of the condition of entrapment and limit earlier described by Mackay, and the way ‘the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.’<sup>210</sup> Compounding this dismal pressure of the past upon the present was the widespread perception of the 20th century by the late-1980s as constituting a veritable history of defeat of left wing projects, from the very recent failure of the UK Miner’s Strike in 1984, to the defeat of revolutionary forces in the Spanish Civil War. These are, counter-intuitively, the weights of the past which *Inventory* sought to free themselves, not by escaping them, but by holding them and the ruins of the past in the present up to close, ecstatic examination. A determinate method of activating the past might yet carry forward the process of ‘magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.’<sup>211</sup> Yet, it is difficult to impute a simplistically heroic effort to *Inventory*. Instead, imagery deployed by the group is steadfastly anti-heroic, evoking image and history of left defeat and damaged subjectivity.<sup>212</sup> Rather than an heroic revolutionary stance, it seems the group sought initially to maintain an attitude of indeterminacy, to remain attentive to their objects and to allow problems to surface.

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210 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972, p.10.

211 Ibid., p.12.

212 Notable here is *Inventory*’s use of an archival photograph of French Communist partisans exiting a German concentration camp at the end of WWII for an invitation card to an event held at the Approach Gallery, January, 2002. It is an stark image of left defeat which acts as a counter-weight against the image of a heroic battle against fascism or a smooth post-war compromise between capital and labour. I propose that it may be read as a pendant joining two narratives in which it does not fit: the triumph of American capitalism on the one hand and the anti-fascist triumph of Stalinist Russia. The French avant-garde’s association with partisan resistance is brought into resonance with what opposes it, sheer destruction of the will for change and for life. At the end of a long and bloody 20th century ‘crushed’ is the state in which *Inventory* expected to find its readers. ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’ was not only the title of the editorial discussed extensively in this chapter, but also of a flyer advertising subscriptions to *Inventory* journal. The image featured on the flyer – a young Frenchman who has just been sentenced to death for murdering his lover – evokes a scene of bitter personal defeat and imminent death as much as the generalised death of love, tragedy of the mass subject living under the life-taking power of the state, or the pessimistic Wildean aphorism: ‘each man kills the thing he loves’. Printed flyer, circa 1996, May Day Rooms archive, London.

## Inventory **SMASH THIS PUNY EXISTENCE**

'When man gets caught, restless with problems, immobilised in a web of his own mental constructions, the easiest and simplest rhetorical device for getting out of the ridiculous mess he has created is to suggest "going beyond it". Thus, to go "beyond" is a concept much favoured by the ponderous. As opposed to the risible strategy of vague prophecy (in the hope of building some sort of oppositional cult) or the much more difficult task of gambling one's existence on smashing through it, the belief in "going beyond" has and will continue to serve as a panacea, an evasion, covering the tracks of a weak acknowledgment which then averts its gaze. So common is this disease that transcendence may be seen as an operation similar to that of side-stepping dog shit in the street'  
- Inventory from *Smash This Puny Existence*

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# **Chapter 5**

## **The Journal and Form: Whole, Fragment, Mythopoeisis**

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# Introduction

*A good journal is like an octopus, continually reaching out and pulling in the theoretical and historical happenings in the environment in which it lives. This journal had a soul – a passionate soul which tried to absorbing everything in the world around it which offered theoretical interest, a political choice, an ethical dimension, or simply a joy of life. The soul of a journal is its radical determination to give meaning to everything it touches, to build it into a theoretical tendency, to embrace it within a mechanism of practical activity.<sup>1</sup>*

In this chapter I attempt to build a framework for understanding some of the more ‘marginal’ forms of writing in *Inventory*. Firstly I consider whether it is meaningful to think of the writing contained in *Inventory* as ‘literature’. To do this I establish some conditions of ‘literature’ in the UK at the end of the 20th century. If *Inventory* is made up of writing which is not literature or journalism, then what kind of writing is it? I pursue this question by reexamining the categories generated in Chapter 1 to for the writing contained in *Inventory*, by grouping and sketching some outlying parameters of non-conformist writing in *Inventory* and within this evaluating the significance of the ‘found texts’ and Glossary published in *Inventory*. This is an exercise which explores mimicry of *Inventory*’s own ‘play with category and convention’ as it is intended definitively not to fully subsume, or exhaust, the writing under the categories proposed, but rather to provide them with para-textual and critical solidarity.<sup>2</sup> I discuss the container (journal) and contained (essay) in three sections covering the Essay, the Glossary and the Journal. These sections pick up from the formal descriptions of Chapter 2 and consider their wider technical, cultural and conceptual meaning. I propose the essay as the central individual component in the wider presentation of the journal and consider its autonomy as well as its associations with both the scientific and aesthetic. Responding both to *Inventory*’s own method and in sympathy with the arguments established in the section on the ‘Essay as Form’, in the Appendices I pursue an analysis of the Glossary through an exposé in the form of a glossary, by making my own ‘glosses’ on, and in parallel to, *Inventory*’s. The glossary, like the essay, possesses an ‘affinity with open intellectual experience’ and ‘becomes true in its progress’.<sup>3</sup> I propose the fragmentary form of the Glossary as a space of instruction for *Inventory*’s readership and experimentation for its contributors. Within the assessment of the Journal as Form I

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Negri discussing the journal *Futur Anterior*, Antonio Negri, ‘Postface to the Complete Text of the Journal *Futur Antérieur* (1989–98)’, <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Postface-to-the-Complete> quoted in Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016, p.226.

<sup>2</sup> In doing so I follow *Inventory*’s methodological proposition by exposing my own writing to pollution by its object of study and this technique is continued in an Glossary Exposé in the Appendices.

consider the question of community and the place of the list, contract, index, and other bureaucratic or technical literary forms within the writing published in *Inventory*. Finally I consider the temporality of the journal and its place in its own times. These steps lead to an assessment of *Inventory*'s originality in terms of writing and publishing history.

## The Literary Absolute and Literary Fragment

This chapter lays out *Inventory* journal's formation in terms of the relation between the whole and its parts: the journal and the writing it cohered around and presented.<sup>4</sup> As acknowledged in Chapters 3 and 4 *Inventory* related to (via Benjamin and Bataille and surrealism generally) and renew a romantic conception of wholeness, total work, or what has been named the 'literary absolute'.<sup>5</sup> This whole, totality or unity, as David Cunningham deft analysis of Breton and Bataille's contending surrealisms indicates, 'may be glimpsed in "the fragments of the future"'.<sup>6</sup> Schlegel's 'fragments' are sensed in projects which are the combination of subjectivity and objectivity, an outgrowth of objects in movement, the 'subjective embryo of a developing object'.<sup>7</sup> In his account of the essay, Adorno argues for '[t]he romantic conception of the fragment as a construction that is not complete but rather progresses onward into the infinite through self-reflection'.<sup>8</sup> This is a fitting model for the journal as a whole, because it remains forever 'not complete' but through 'self-reflection' inclusive of 'breaks' and 'discontinuity' progresses towards the infinite.

In this chapter I use this image of the fragment to orientate a number of problems and questions around *Inventory*'s adoption of the journal as a form for artistic and resistant, immanent knowledge production. The journal implicates and annexes scientific knowledge but also

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<sup>3</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. 'The Essay As Form', in *Notes to Literature*, Vol.1, pp.3-23. Columbia University Press, 1991, p.13.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Neville's contribution to the special issue 'Collected' discusses the distinction between whole and fragment. 'There are two types of institutional collection; the indexical collection and the museum collection. This distinction hinges upon an understanding of 'whole' and 'fragment'. Within the indexical collection, items that together comprise the collection as 'whole', are 'fragments' of that collection. Within the museum these same items become 'whole' through an act of presentation that serves to isolate the item as a distinct object, removing it from an archival space where it would have existed within an array of similar objects descriptively understood as a class within a general taxonomy, to become a proper name.' Simon Neville, 'The World According to Dewey', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.34-35, p.34.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, (Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester), Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> David Cunningham, 'The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde', *Substance* #107, Vol. 34, no.2, 2005, pp.47-65, p.53 quoting Schlegel, Friedrich von. *Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p.21.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit., p.20.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Essay as Form', op. cit., p.15.

aesthetic experience through its form.<sup>9</sup> The question of *Inventory*'s 'journal-ism' has been partially considered in Chapter 2, where I compared *Inventory* to other journals. Here the *journal as form* is considered in relation to artistic interests through its direction by three artist-writer-editors (Abbott, Claydon, Scrivener). However, through the journal, artistic interests draw in and remain in tension with extra-artistic interests. Since a number of contributors had no artistic training at all and many contributors can be shown to explore 'extra-artistic interests'. This approach, whereby the journal borrows from both scientific and artistic technique but makes something else, is in line with the 'Notes to contributors' which discouraged contributions either of a 'scientific character (in the sense of an ethnographic, documentary discourse)' or 'artistic, literary value (which would condemn this material to an aesthetic musing)'.<sup>10</sup> As I have shown throughout this study, the contents of the journal are not reducible to 'artistic', 'literary' or 'scientific' 'interests'.<sup>11</sup> I argue then that the journal provided a format – even a kind of camouflage – for artists to explore possibilities of research and knowledge which could take place neither in art magazines nor scientific or scholarly journals, because both had become too specialist and narrowly conformed to disciplinary boundaries. Instead, *Inventory* proposed the possibility of unified knowledge through eclecticism, posing the prospect of absolute knowledge whilst at the same time undermining it as a form of hubris which undermined institutional research through a processual, collective and 'public' search for truth.<sup>12</sup> 'Inventory is a means of writing, recording, reclassifying and cataloguing the social material life that exists around us.'<sup>13</sup> Through Chapter 2 I indicated the ways in which *Inventory* related to models of journals developed by artistic and art historical movements (*Documents*, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, *Art-Language*, *October*), however I argued that they borrowed from these, as well as ethnographic or sociological sources, as much to differentiate their own endeavour from that of their peers as to retrieve a sociological element from these enterprises. They came to these models with a strong desire to overcome mere 'aesthetic musing' in a search for truth about the 'social material life' around them.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say aesthetics did not have a role in the decision-making involved in borrowing from these examples and constructing the journal as they did. In fact the aesthetic and

<sup>9</sup> An argument made by Theodor W. Adorno for the essay, which I extract from his work in the section of this chapter 'The Essay as Form' to argue that it can be applied to the journal as *Inventory* worked with it as a form.

<sup>10</sup> *Inventory*, 'Notes to Contributors', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, p.128 and reproduced in subsequent issues.

<sup>11</sup> *Inventory* did not publish reviews of exhibitions, interviews with artists or features dedicated to a single artist, artwork or movement. The journal is definitely not an art journal. Rather, its editors claimed to be 'interested in all kinds of phenomena' and specified further '[a]ny subject/object that is expressive of differing, complex, relationships'. *Inventory*, 'Do You Feel Crushed?' *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.4-8, p.7.

<sup>12</sup> The question of what constitutes 'public' is shown (in Chapter 3 and elsewhere) to be a question of struggle rather than a stable state.

<sup>13</sup> *Inventory*, 'For a Sociology...', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.4-5, p.4.

<sup>14</sup> 'Notes to Contributors', op. cit.

aesthetic thinking is crucial for differentiating *Inventory* from scholarly journals. I argue that this choice, to fuse art with anthropology in a method and to orientate art towards an inquiry into knowledge about society involved aesthetic thinking and decision making, produced the journal as an object of aesthetic experience as well as knowledge which challenged the limitations of disciplinary boundaries.<sup>15</sup>

Thus far in this study I have sought to find what is unifying about the journal, what consensus it made from its diverse contributions. The chapter continues this presentation of the whole, but seeks the outliers, the marginal, those elements which may seem to present themselves as anomalous or disruptive to the unity of presentation *Inventory* comprised. In fact this tension will be shown to be a core concern of the journal and, with reference to Chapters 3 and 4, this chapter shall further specify *Inventory*'s approach to totality. I argue that futurity, as described by Schlegel, is at stake even if *Inventory*'s image of the fragment hewed close to fragments of the past, waste, the discarded, the outmoded.<sup>16</sup> The journal, as I have argued, is precisely a form which found itself, towards the end of the 20th century, freed from its prior associations.<sup>17</sup> It could be understood, from a scientific or technical point of view, to have become marginal to the development of either science, the economy or the arts.<sup>18</sup> Art criticism is widely understood to have waned in force, both inside the art world and outside of it as the 20th century drew to a close. The scientific journal has not exactly disappeared but its specialisation has removed from it the propensity for 'total knowledge'. I claim that the journal's changed status and contingent past development was central to the reasons which made it available for appropriation by *Inventory* and their contributors. This was also true of the encyclopedia or critical dictionary, of which the glossary is derivative.<sup>19</sup> In order to appropriate the journal form meaningfully, *Inventory* grasped

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<sup>15</sup> 'Inventory is a collective enterprise set up by a group of writers, artists, and theorists looking to explore alternatives to the limitations imposed on these disciplines. It operates on a number of fronts: as an experimental journal, in the presentation of material in diverse formats and as an ongoing process whose form we can only guess at.' *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

<sup>16</sup> Notably in Adam Scrivener, 'Waste, Residues and Traces', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997, pp.94–101.

<sup>17</sup> These are the associations firstly related to the journal as a format for the dissemination of scientific research and secondly to the artists' magazine. What those associations were was initially established in Chapter 2 in terms of models and precursors for *Inventory* journal

<sup>18</sup> The obsolescence of print but not directly the journal are discussed in *Inventory*'s final editorial statement, *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, Art criticism's 'obsolescence' was the topic of a special issue of *October* journal, *October* 100, Spring 2002, pp. 3–5. An article by Somers discusses the history of scientific papers and journals, James Somers, 'The Scientific Paper Is Obsolete', *The Atlantic*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/04/the-scientific-paper-is-obsolete/556676/> [Accessed 5 February 2019]

<sup>19</sup> Max Horkheimer, 'Encyclopedia' in *Dawn and Decline - Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, (Trans. Michael Shaw) New York: Seabury Press, 1978, p.232.

fragments of its past and recombined them with new and emergent interests and tensions in their contemporary historical moment. The problem of ‘opposition to capitalism in the name of pre-capitalist values’, identified by Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy as a component common to ‘romantic anti-capitalism’ rife both in the Romantic movement and late-20th century social movements, is a problem which haunts not only Benjamin and Bataille’s pre-war moment but also the *fin de siècle* 1990s and even 2000s.<sup>20</sup> However, the journal’s strong focus on contemporary phenomena, critical and historical readings of technologies, attention to the emergence of new social relations and experience tends work against this tendency by upending a static presentation of the past, present or future. *Inventory*’s engagement with Benjamin provided for an understanding of the fragment in a special relation to the shocks provided for by modern urban experience: ‘transformed into cognitive fragments then the shock experience becomes politically instructive’.<sup>21</sup> Esther Leslie argues that in Benjamin’s thinking ‘[h]istorically remaindered objects, fragments of the past, are accosted as documents of cognition that detonate political significance once bombarded with knowledge from the present.’<sup>22</sup> In a special journal issue on ‘obsolescence’ *October*’s editors argue that ‘Benjamin found [...] the “outmoded” liberating because it offers a point of view outside what some see as the totalizing ambitions of each new technological order.’<sup>23</sup> Understanding the ‘things’, ‘phenomena’ or objects *Inventory* held up to analysis as *documents* of a contradictory totality, I argue, helpfully characterises the attitudes and temporal conditions with which *Inventory* approached the journal. Understanding the *journal as form* permits a unique perspective on how the journal united in dynamic assembly both the fragment and the whole, the particular and absolute in movement and in a process of change.

## Romantic Work and Presentation of Ideas

My recapitulation of the romantic art work recalls the distinction between presentation and enquiry discussed in Chapter 4 in terms of the debate between Adorno and Benjamin as restaged by *Inventory*, but in this Chapter, the tension between presentation and enquiry is considered not only methodologically but as a question of form. Like *Inventory*, ‘[t]he Romantics also employed

<sup>20</sup> Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy. ‘Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism’. *New German Critique*, No.32, 1 April 1984, p.42–92, p.46.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Claydon, “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’: Walter Benjamin and the City’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.36-65., p.63.

<sup>22</sup> Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin Overpowering Conformism*. London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2000, p.49.

<sup>23</sup> *October*, Vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002), pp.3-5.

collective practices of writing as part of a simultaneously intellectual and political project.’<sup>24</sup> In *The Literary Absolute* Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy forward an understanding of Romanticism as the inauguration of a modern concept of poetry and literature developing out of the concerns of German idealist philosophy. But what they identify in Romanticism reaches beyond the ‘impossibility of an adequate presentation of ideas’ expressed by Kant.

In the romantic theory of literature and art, what is perceived as both the dead end and the most formidable challenge of the Kantian model of presentation is transformed into a model of art as the aesthetic activity of production and formation in which the absolute might be experienced and realized in an unmediated, immediate fashion.<sup>25</sup>

While Kant establishes the division between literature and philosophy, Romantics, such as Schlegel and Novalis, sought to challenge the Kantian model of presentation and instead to generate ‘literature producing itself as it produces its own theory’.<sup>26</sup> Adorno, in his celebration of the ‘essay as form’, from which this chapter adapts its title, criticises Kant for encouraging ‘self-critical reason’ to seal itself off from ‘curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought’.<sup>27</sup> For Adorno, the essay achieves both an autonomy from and a solidarity with its object because its own singularity of presentation encourages attention to the constructed nature of language, something science and scholarship tend to reject.<sup>28</sup> Schlegel wrote of romantic poetry that it should ‘make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical’ and ‘animate them with the pulsations of humor’, ‘lose itself in what it describes’, be ‘capable in that it organizes’, ‘[i]t can be exhausted by no theory’ and ‘it should forever be becoming and never be perfected’.<sup>29</sup> It is this particularly demanding model of literature as self-sufficient, as auto-theorising and as a contending with the absolute within which I shall seek to characterise

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<sup>24</sup> Stewart Martin, *Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy*, PhD Thesis, Middlesex University, 2002, p.159.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, ‘Translators’ Introduction’ in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, (Trans.) Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p.ix.

<sup>26</sup> *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, op. cit., p.12.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Whereas a self-critical reason should, according to Kant, have both feet firmly on the ground, should ground itself, it tends inherently to seal itself off from everything new and also from curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought, something existential ontology vilifies as well.’ ‘The Essay as Form’, op. cit., p.21.

<sup>28</sup> ‘The essay retains, precisely in the autonomy of its presentation, which distinguishes it from scientific and scholarly information, traces of the communicative element such information dispenses with. In the essay the satisfactions that rhetoric tries to provide for the listener are sublimated into the idea of a happiness in freedom vis a vis the object, a freedom that gives the object more of what belongs to it than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas.’ ‘The Essay as Form’, op. cit., pp.21–22.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich von Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, (Trans. Peter Firchow), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp.31–32.

*Inventory*. The burgeoning regime of informatics, a recognised aspect of the Victorian era, but truly becoming hegemonic in the 20th century with the growing entwinement of massive bureaucratic apparatuses and the modern state appears therefore, from the position of hindsight in the late-20th and early 21st century – as an instrumentalisation of ‘self-critical reason’ armoured against ‘feeling’ – to have exploited exactly the Kantian deficit. Moreover, the emerging techniques of informatics appear across the last century to be critically entwined with modernist literature’s concerns, though structured by strong currents of ‘antagonism’.<sup>30</sup> It is as an hubristic cipher for the drive towards the ‘absolute’ and ‘absolute’ knowledge which *Inventory* approached contemporary informatics specifically and classification systems in general, but the response is playful (e.g. forcing a computer to make poetry; playing with the symbology of contemporary science; or indicating the quasi-religious drives behind the search for the absolute.). Following Nietzsche’s appropriation of Schlegel’s phrase, the ‘fragments of the future’ shift from being about the work or project, and begin to be about man himself, the question of a new and freer composition of subjects becomes the question of recomposing humankind and human community in such a way as to be orientated to the future, oriented to that which isn’t yet in the present, to that which remains blocked as impossibility.<sup>31</sup> These concerns about composition I have shown to be central to *Inventory*’s concerns, by which the journal proved a catalyst for community and the organ for the exploration of community and ‘communifying forms’ in society. The question of organisation and arguably self-organisation, is central to Hegel’s claims about books, that what distinguishes a book as being ‘rich in content’ in its ‘general results’ and behind these lie the ‘categories’ it has established or shaped.<sup>32</sup> This is a wonderful justification for understanding *Inventory*’s contribution as

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<sup>30</sup> ‘information and literary narrative have a history of entanglement as well as antagonism, and [...] this relationship – the productive challenge posed to literature by the genres of information – was a significant factor in the cultural shaping of modernist narrative.’ James Purdon, *Modernist Informatics: Literature, Information, and the State*, New York: NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.4.

<sup>31</sup> ‘I walk among human beings as among the fragments of the future; that future that I see. And all my creating and striving amounts to this, that I create and piece together into one, what is now fragment and riddle and grisly accident. And how could I bear to be a human being if mankind were not also creator and solver of riddles and redeemer of accident?’ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Adrian Del Caro & Robert B. Pippin (Eds.), Adrian Del Caro (Trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.110. This passage served as the inspiration for the essay Simon Neville, ‘The Redemption of Accidents’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.22-34.

<sup>32</sup> ‘one says more about a book, say, or a speech being rich in content to the extent that more thoughts, general results, and so on, are to be found in it. Just as, conversely, one does not let a book or, more specifically, a novel count as being rich in content simply because it heaps up a great amount of individual occurrences, situations, and the like. Ordinary consciousness thus explicitly recognizes that more belongs to the content than the sensory material, and this more consists in the thoughts and here primarily in the categories.’ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part 1: Science of Logic*, (Trans. Klaus Brinkmann



categorical, rather than simply a ‘heap’ or consisting solely of ‘sensory material’, since, as Hegel observes, ‘understanding or knowledge by means of the categories is unable to know things in themselves.’ *Inventory* establish a recursive approach both to the direct knowledge of phenomena and to the categories by which they may be known in abstraction, setting both forms of knowledge in dynamic and mobile relationship.<sup>33</sup>

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and Daniel O Dahlstrom), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, § 43, p.88

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.88.

alien

certain disdain for hierarchical relations, relations of the state, as such proposing a more or less anarchic (archaic) behaviour of being. It is probably in no position to argue, engaging as it does with a very hierarchical (sedentary) model of being, that of words, writing, and academia. A prisoner can be bound in a straitjacket which might be intellectually viewed as morally unsound, yet the real emotional disdain inevitably arises at the condition of peculiar behaviour; the foaming mouth, the self-mutilation, the chaotic shaking...

The architecture of motion should be understood as an activity of burial (digging, excavation), as opposed to one of raising (building). It lies below the feet rather than above the head, and it is landscape rather than portrait. It is the sounding, and thus the silencing (laying to rest) of the territory.

### Day 5: Anti-form

*"A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit."*<sup>14</sup>

To even be quoting this paragraph by Bataille is to be rubbing its very utterance against the grain, but this is a necessary dilemma. As we can understand by the writing, Bataille considered his

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Formless' [in] *Visions Of Excess, Selected Writings 1927-39* Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1985.

# *Inventory* as Literature

To initially position the status of the writing contained in the journal I begin by considering *Inventory* as literature. I pose the question: is *Inventory* literature and what is *Inventory* as literature? This may, at first, sound counterintuitive: we know that the core members of the editorial group were educated as visual artists and I have indicated that the forcefields of influence which made them and made the journal distinct were broadly speaking ‘artistic’ and as John Roberts has argued, the ‘writerly’ has become a specific artistic competence since the 1960s.<sup>34</sup> Given their orientation towards surrealism, its tensions, especially between an anti-ocular or anti-visual tendency on Bataille’s part, and as a philosophical or, as André Breton maintained, ‘revolutionary’ movement not reducible to ‘literature’, must be considered.<sup>35</sup> Surrealism in France is considered a literary movement, where in the UK and US it is considered primarily an artistic movement. Bataille and Breton’s statements invoke fractures in the time capsule that is surrealism they pay testament to a seam of disagreements over relationships between writing and living which would reappear as concerns across diverse contributors to *Inventory*. *Inventory* were of course partisans of Bataille’s position in the split between Breton and Bataille, but this notion of a split is been overplayed by some commentators.<sup>36</sup> As I have discussed, *Inventory* apprehended surrealism as a whole, and took a partisan position regarding its interpretation and what it was meaningful of its legacy to their practice. Because mere ‘literature’ is a problematic object for surrealism and for *Inventory* both. We can say that they clearly hew much closer to Bataille and Leiris’ approach to writing (which we will examine closer shortly in the context of their ‘glossaries’) than that of Breton, whose publishing formats certainly took a more literary form (mostly novels) and themes he employed tended towards mysticism and mystification. *Inventory* as a publishing venture was clearly interested in writing, but I will argue that whilst their publishing model was eclectic, what they tended to reject and negate was an established model of literature and even if their exploration of the journal as a self-differentiating or self-differing medium self-consciously drew connections

<sup>34</sup> John Roberts, ‘Writerly Artists: Conceptual Art, Bildung, and the Intellectual Division of Labour’, *Rab-Rab: Journal for Political and Formal Inquiries into Art*, No.1, 2014, pp.9-20.

<sup>35</sup> Such tensions are borne out in the juxtaposition of the Bretonian surrealist’s ‘Declaration of January 27 1925’ that: ‘we have nothing to do with literature’ and Bataille’s criticism ‘that nothing can enter into M. Breton’s confused head except in poetic form. All of existence, conceived as purely literary by M. Breton, diverts him from the shabby, sinister, or inspired events occurring all around him’. Georges Bataille, ‘The Old Mole and the Prefix Sur’, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, (Ed. and Trans. Allan Stoekl), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp.32-44, op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Breton and Bataille were able to overcome their differences for the sake of common political activity in the context of the Popular Front in France and in the Post-war period continued to collaborate extensively. See my discussion of *Contre-Attaque* in Chapter 2 and Bataille and Breton in Chapter 3.

between literary works and ‘book works’.<sup>37</sup> In the subsequent section I will consider what constituted literature in *Inventory*’s period of working. This is to be thought through in view of *Inventory*’s apprehension and reactivation of surrealism’s publishing praxis, the relations it established between research and action or writing and action. *Inventory* did not replicate the constraints of surrealist writing practices such as ‘automatic writing’ rather they drew some basic inspiration but also sought their own forms and formats.<sup>38</sup> Whether these represent adequate models for the understanding of the marginal forms of writing developed within the categories defined as Glossary and ‘Found Texts’ shall be a question which guides us through the analysis of the different categories *Inventory* used, and the ones which I have attempted to impose upon them for the purpose of this study.<sup>39</sup>

## The Novel is a Theory With a Narrative Interface

Although there are some marked resemblances between some of the more experimental contributions to the journal and late-modernist literature, and although there are essay contributions which approach discussion of literature directly<sup>40</sup>, *Inventory*’s editors almost never mention literature as something to identify with but instead reflect on their practice as one of *writing*. It is clear that by their writing they meant both more and less than literature. *Inventory*’s editors specifically discouraged ‘literary’ contributions in their ‘Notes to Contributors’ stating: ‘we do not wish this method to have a scientific character [...] nor an artistic, literary value’.<sup>41</sup> None the less the field of reference found across *Inventory* is ‘literary’ as well as sociological, artistic and philosophical. Authors frequently cited (aside from Adorno, Breton, Bataille and Benjamin) are Lawrence Sterne, Joseph Conrad, Antonin Artaud and Franz Kafka. *Inventory* borrowed widely from the literary canon but also probed its borders as well as the outer reaches of philosophy,

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the discussion of book works and literary experiments with the book form Paul Claydon, ‘Tropes’, in Maria Fusco & Ian Hunt (Eds.), *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*. London: Bookworks, 2004, pp.123–128.

<sup>38</sup> A notable exception is a text composed by *Inventory*’s three editors as an ‘exquisite corpse’. *Inventory*, ‘Exquisite Corpse’, in John Russell (ed.), *Frozen Tears*, Birmingham: ARTicle Press, University of Central England, 2003, pp.703–716.

<sup>39</sup> An Index of Categories of Writing in *Inventory* Journal appears in the Appendices as a supporting guide to this chapter, though attempts to restrict the writing in *Inventory* is shown to be ultimately frustrated.

<sup>40</sup> Keith Miller, ‘East of Eden’, *Inventory* Vol.1 No.3, 1996, pp.26–41 discusses writing on London by Iain Sinclair, Patrick Wright, Martin Amis and Peter Ackroyd. Rakesh Sidhu, ‘Literature and Partition’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.78–85 discusses writing by Salman Rushdie and Saadat Hasan Manto in their contribution to ‘the novel as a historic record of [India and Pakistan’s] partition’ and Steve Beard, ‘Anthropofferjism Manifesto’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.34–44 is a hybrid of literary criticism, fiction and post-colonial theory.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Notes to Contributors’, op. cit.

sociology and other ‘sciences’. In Chapter 7 I discuss a contribution by Iain Sinclair and the ways in which *Inventory*’s own approach could be differentiated from this well published novelist and poet. Several texts express a passing antagonism towards the established literary canon, those by Beard, Miller and Sidhu cited above being a case in point. These texts generally converge on the theme that ‘national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature’ and generally seek to challenge that tradition by devising anti-national forms of literature.<sup>42</sup> Beard’s ‘Anthropofferjism Manifesto’ (2000) makes its quest to subordinate this register of ‘literature’ explicit, claiming, in a subheading, that ‘[t]he Novel is a Theory With a Narrative Interface’.<sup>43</sup> Beard goes on to ‘remix’ passages from Rudyard Kipling, H. Rider Haggard, Arthur Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, John Wyndham, William Golding and Michael Moorcock.<sup>44</sup> The matter of antagonism is both the master form, novel, or ‘Oedipal novel’ but also the national or colonial status of these texts, against which, Beard proposes through his rewrites ‘a reconceptualized tradition of canonical authors’ to achieve what he calls a form of ‘contrapuntal writing’ which ‘cures the oedipal novel’.<sup>45</sup> In doing so the tradition of the English novel is satirically woven into anthropo-colonial and anticolonial history and understood to be a ‘neoimperialist cultural import/export.’<sup>46</sup> This approach extends *Inventory*’s proposition of carrying out ‘an anthropology of ourselves’, notably drawing on Georges Perec’s concept of the ‘endotic’.<sup>47</sup> The approach offers a form of literary commentary, both on anthropological and novelistic literature, in order to do so it establishes a theory of literature – generating a list of theoretical terms to act as a guide – and at the same time it generates an experimental literature of its own through the remixed passages of canonical novels. This ‘literature’ is fragmentary and satirical. The working theory of literature, clearly in debt to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of ‘minor literature’, which Beard proposes then is as an understanding of novels as cultural texts amongst others constituting a form of knowledge about other cultures.<sup>48</sup> This is a highly concentrated version of the approach about which there

<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, (Trans.) Dana Polan. Minneapolis, Minn. [u.a.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2012, p.16.

<sup>43</sup> Steve Beard, ‘Anthropofferjism Manifesto’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.34-44, p.36.

<sup>44</sup> Many of which are authors found in the United Kingdom’s English Literature GCSE and A-Level National Curriculum. ‘Anthropofferjism Manifesto’, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>47</sup> ‘What’s needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we’ve been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic.’ Georges Perec, ‘The Infraordinary’ (1973) available, <http://daytodaydata.ellieharrison.com/georgesperec.html> [Accessed 7/02/2019]

<sup>48</sup> ‘The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialisation of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.’ *Towards a Minor Literature*, op. cit. p.18.

seems more or less a consensus across many contributions to *Inventory*, a consequence of the levelling of phenomena which the editorial group propose is the understanding of a pluralistic field of phenomena as forms of ‘text’: graffiti, novels, maps, vinyl records, photobooth portraits, even natural phenomena, as simply forms to be read sociologically and experientially. Developing this view are a number of essays on the cultural significance of ‘pattern’, perhaps best understood through engagement with Nick Norton’s essays ‘EvilEye Live’ (1999) and ‘Unsettled Pattern’ (2003), which each propose a radically mimetic and syncretic reading of symbolic phenomena ranging from jewellery to satellite dishes.<sup>49</sup> Norton understood his own writing for *Inventory* under his self-made category of ‘theory-fiction’.<sup>50</sup> Rather telling is the assertion that his writing used *Inventory* as a vehicle because his submissions to popular science fiction magazine *Interzone* were regularly and summarily rejected. Images, diagrams and graphemes regular feature in Norton’s extraordinary essays for the journal, whether featured as a run of the images at the end of the essay (visual essays in their own right) or integrated directly into the text (as pseudo-mathematical/scientific graphemes) they are equally integral to associations constructed by the essay.<sup>51</sup> That Norton’s interesting writing practice (which incorporates poetry, essays and other forms) found its first platform in *Inventory* and subsequently support from arts publishing ventures Proboscis and Bookworks is testament to the narrowness with which literature in the UK is policed and corralled.

Paul Claydon’s short piece ‘Re:Collection’ strikes out at ‘literature’ in a more general sense as an agent of memory. By annexing potential and immediacy collection makes a ‘mandatory accumulation of memories’.

Literature only compounds the problem by transliterating the experience of others within ourselves; their sediments, toxins, detritus, everything that forgetting finds indigestible, compacts slowly throughout our lives into a residue as dense and as smooth as black porcelain.<sup>52</sup>

Literature, in distinction from ‘our ephemeral experience of the present’ is conceived as one with this spirit of accumulation which ‘mediates human history, fossilises the advancement of science,

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<sup>49</sup> Nick Norton, ‘EvilEyeLive’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.15–38 and Nick Norton, *Unsettled Pattern*, *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.80–110.

<sup>50</sup> Nick Norton email correspondence with the author, August, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> As well as the two examples cited above where images are interspersed, or follow the text in a discreet sequence, Nick Norton, ‘Would You Believe it/A Report from Beyond Zero’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, 38–42, features symbols integrated directly into the text.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Claydon, ‘Re-Collection’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.82–83, p.82.

and transforms existence into a clumsy ever the same dance of survival.’<sup>53</sup> In distinction to the flexibility and ephemeral form of the journal, this state is compared to ‘the book’, an imaginary book which retains ‘the same story unending, from generation to generation without change.’<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



Is  $\infty$  therefore a closed system? If so there can be no infinity. Thus bound, eternity is not forever, it is simply local. On the other hand, the parts may be greater than the whole.

Let us continue in our consideration of  $\rightarrow$ . (Whichever way it may be going. It should more correctly be delineated thus  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$ .)

$\rightarrow\leftarrow$  is at once experienced and measured, unique and normalised - or standardised. So our moment might become GMT, nano-seconds, pico-seconds, hours and minutes and time is money. Calendars and years, in which there is work; seasons and decades to be weighed and sold. Thus  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  is  $\rightarrow$  when placed under a managerial regime. Not that the naming  $\rightarrow$  controls  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  per se, but the control mechanism does flow out from it. This naming, measuring, is the basis for regulating activity, for feeding ourselves, for agriculture and government and the exploration of space. Yet activity is not forever regulated;  $\rightarrow$  becomes  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  because of our attention to it, our inattention, boredom, consumption of sugar, alcohol, metabolic eruption.

*It went on forever*

*I stood outside of time*

*Everything happened so fast*






Logically it must be posited that such variable experiences of  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  cannot be correct. In that we observe  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  through  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  and term it  $\rightarrow$ .  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  is flat or steady background radiation. There can only be one rate of expansion for the universe and everything else must be delusion, a hallucination of fluctuation over consistent and constant time. Such an obvious account, however, cannot admit to the clear observation that rather than a single smooth expanse the universe has become a decidedly lumpy place. There was a probability of gravity and so gravity was admitted. One collision, one split atom, and the sky was seeded with stars and the stars shed planets...

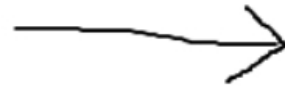
Our naming  $\rightarrow$  is a collision, a division that admits for further subdivision. As too our variable/subjective experience of  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  is in and of itself fission.

Within the macro scale  $\infty$  movement from  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  to  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  there is actually another entirely different progression towards 0. The infinity  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  which is  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$ , understood as  $\rightarrow$ , which is not infinite but bound,  $\infty$ , may in fact be infinitely fractionalized. Simply termed:  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$ . Therefore our experience of time is, paradoxically, moving away from 0. Further, it would seem that finally we can admit to a supersedence of a linear notion - or notation - of time. ( $\rightarrow$  &  $\leftarrow$ ).

If  $\rightarrow\leftarrow$  is understood as an attempt, or a probability of an attempt, to revert to that original state, 0, then we must immediately realise this to be a flawed progression. The movement is not towards zero but to a rapid spiralling out into fractal infinities.



We should consider further where our time is leading us. What could be the target, no matter in which direction our time arrow might point? Would it be fair to say that both  $\longrightarrow$  &  $\longleftarrow$  are intent on reaching 0. The imperative of an entropic system. Yet if the big bang  is also its own mirror image  then might not that big crunch be also a big bang. That is to say, this universe is an oscillating system of two universes balanced around a mutual cataclysm. 0 cannot be stable, 0 cannot be the conclusion in this - unless some of our universe (dark matter) is missing and we drift eternally on into a state of No Heat and No Energy wherein even drift will become, eventually, No Thing. 0. Either  was a statistical blip, a glitch in some presumed constant, 0, or both  &  are united in the self organising system  $\infty$ .



Our moment might become GMT, nano-seconds, pico-seconds, hours or minutes and time is money. Calendars and years in which there is working, playing, surviving, and negation; seasons and decades to be weighed and sold, to be smuggled out, to be treasured. Thus



is



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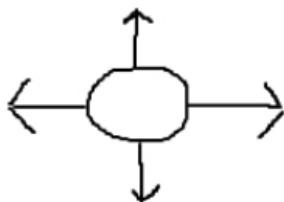
Everything happened so fast

Such a variable experience of



cannot be correct.

To observe



## The Book as Self-Differing Medium

Another perspective is broached on literature in a text not published in *Inventory* journal, but authored by an *Inventory* editor, in a context which contributes to an anthology of commentaries on the ‘artist’s book’ and implicitly contributes a discussion of *Inventory* journal itself as an artist’s publication.<sup>55</sup> In his assessment of the ‘artist’s book’ Claydon asserts that ‘[i]t is in literature, more particularly that we find the germ of a new consciousness towards the book. [...] it is precisely those closest to the book, to literary and visual experiment that wrought the irrevocable change that led to what I understand as what we may call the artist’s book.’<sup>56</sup> This is a tendency, which has significant precursors in literary history, that has been developed most recently and perhaps intensively within various forms of minoritarian publishing, it is these which Nicholas Thoburn frames in a recent book on radical publishing as the ‘self-differing medium’.<sup>57</sup> The essential move, for Claydon, which draws diverse experiments that have troubled the book’s standard formats from Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* to Lewis Carroll, Mallarme and Kurt Schwitters into relationship to the artist’s book are all approaches which ‘empatically stipulat[e] the book work’s objecthood’.<sup>58</sup> This argument is supported through an illustration from Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759) in which a black monochrome rectangle blots out the page space. The significance of Sterne’s work for *Inventory* is further indicated in an epigram to their final editorial drawn from the same work.<sup>59</sup> This is, as I understand it, an argument against repeating the authoritative form of the book for its own sake but to make it different each time, to make the book or journal different from itself and from other books. The consequences of the historic developments of the book form, summarised in extremely broad terms by Claydon, is that ‘[n]o longer terminating its function upon being read the book becomes a device in an ever-expanding arena’.<sup>60</sup> In a complimentary piece in

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<sup>55</sup> Paul Claydon, ‘Tropes’, in Maria Fusco & Ian Hunt (Eds.), *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*. London: Bookworks, 2004, pp.123–128.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>57</sup> ‘A self-differing medium is constituted when the conventions and structures that determine the medium of a particular artwork are themselves taken up in the work in a fashion that alters those determinations, such that the work comes to specify its own medial conditions and hence becomes self-differing.’ Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016, p.232.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? For ever in the same track – for ever at the same pace? Shall we be destined to the days of eternity, on holy-days, as well as working days, to be shewing the relicks of learning, as monks do the relicks of their saints – without working one – one single miracle with them?’ Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman*, London: J.M. Dent, 1912, p.251 quoted in ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, op. cit., p.5.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Tropes’, op. cit., p.128.

the same publication, *Inventory* editor Damian Abbott recalls ‘a strange object sat amongst the pleated, multiple Catherine Cooksons and Len Deightons: an annual whose every page had been obscured by images of ships, all glued very carefully into place. Ships at sea, ships at rest, each torn from sources of varying print quality, each contributing to the erasure of all previous content.’ This ‘found text’ is offered as a rival ‘book work’: ‘It was a meeting of aspiration and expedience [...] Unhindered as it was by a concern for form, a necessary form had evolved in any case, a by-product of its furious engagement in a three-way fornication between the images, the desires inscribed upon them, and their method of depiction. We would perhaps take this as exemplary strategy, but for the book’s uniqueness.’<sup>61</sup> This is a commitment repeated in *Inventory*’s final editorial, and implicitly there is a provocation to artists to look further afield than the myopic field of contemporary art, but also vis-a-vis the book’s form, to not use the book as a ‘relic of learning’ a self-satisfied proof of knowledge acquisition, but to ask the book to perform ‘miracles’ to make of it an object of magic and perhaps enchantment.<sup>62</sup> *Inventory* camouflaged itself as a commodity, in order to embody critique of commodification and art. The strangeness of *Inventory* as a ‘bookwork’ therefore emerges from this dual commitment to singularity: the desire to turn the book against itself, to exceed its limits, and the equal desire not to make something unique or rarified that might become a fetish of artistic or authorial value.

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<sup>61</sup> (Authored and titled as *Inventory*) *Inventory*, ‘Inventory’, in *Put About*, op. cit., p.183.

<sup>62</sup> *Inventory*, ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, p.5, pp.5-13.

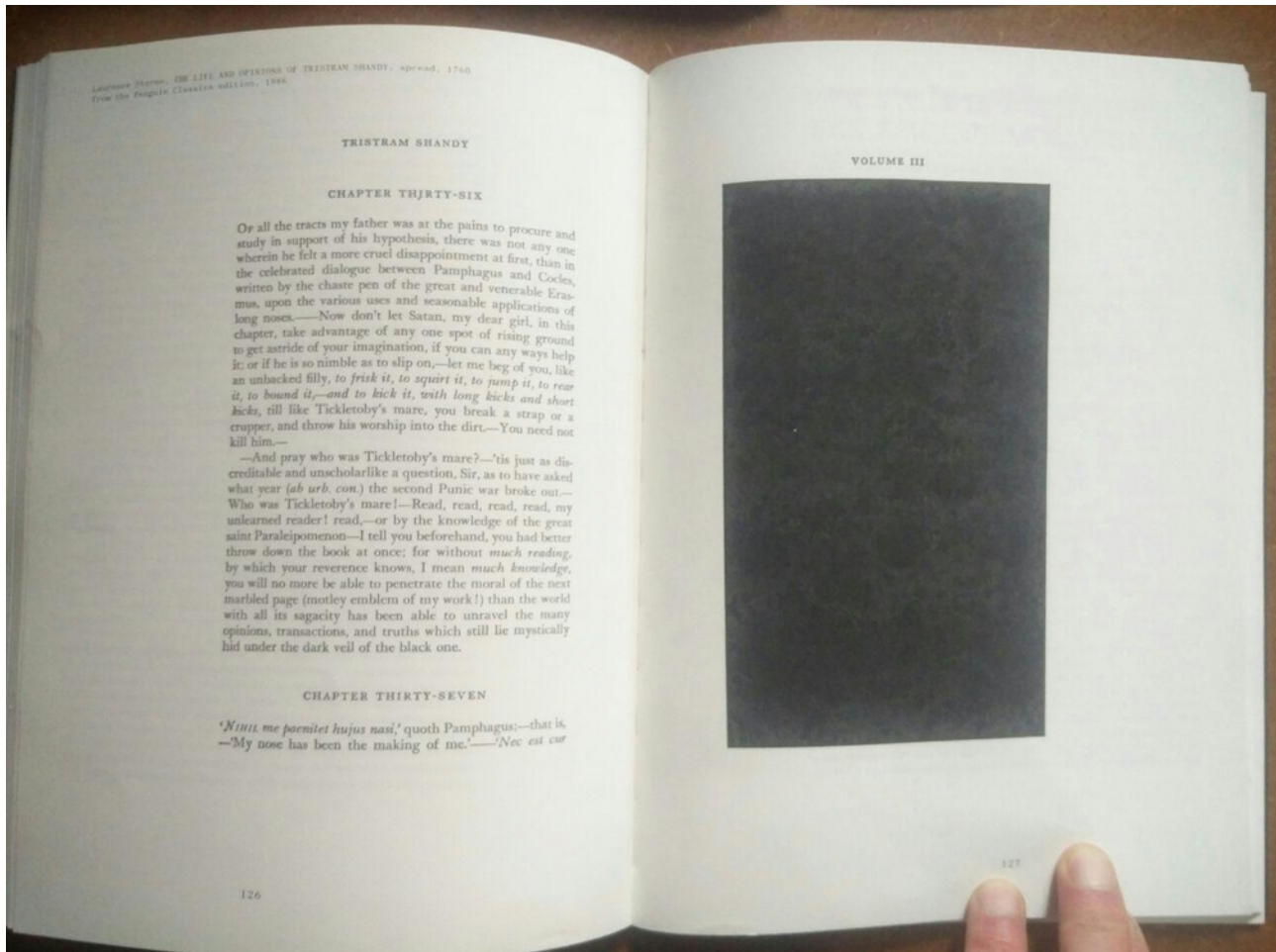


Image: Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy*, (1759), as reproduced in Paul Claydon, 'Tropes', *Put About*, op. cit., pp.126-127

# Literature and the Economic Value of Culture and the Arts

The opposite of enchantment would be one way of characterising the industrial condition of institutional literature at the end of the 20th Century. This is a commercial industry which constructs the 'literary as an obvious pre-existing category' and both develops and polices what is purported to be 'literature's unbiased, reflective moral purpose'.<sup>63</sup> Understanding 'writerly conditions' in the UK, enables understanding of what the 'limitations imposed' on writing for *Inventory* were and how they sought to reconstruct writing as a negation of these established conditions.<sup>64</sup> In this brief attempt to establish what conditioned literature in *Inventory*'s own period I will discuss Sarah Brouillette's critique of the UK culture industry's instrumentalisation of writers in the 1990s. This will help frame the conditions in, or rather under, which *Inventory* worked and in which their work circulated, or rather did not circulate.<sup>65</sup> Brouillette's presentation of literature's status and agency in this period, the Blair years of the 1990s, challenges the commonplace view of 'a split, dividing literature as incipient critique from literature as marketable, palatable critique-lite'.<sup>66</sup> Instead she regards these two poles 'as an essential and united feature of our literary world.'<sup>67</sup> This reversal of the separation of literature and criticism immediately poses a direct challenge to any attempts to exclude published in *Inventory*'s by understanding them as 'outside' the literary canon, but also has bearings on *Inventory* as literature, criticism, as autonomous or sovereign, or not. Brouillette's focus leads from the analysis of 'literature's engagement with the incorporation of the value of culture's autonomy from capital into neoliberal capital.'<sup>68</sup> In this period the autonomy of the arts was celebrated by the very same cultural forces (funding and governance) that sought to instrumentalise this autonomy in ways which would socialise work on terms that would 'prove both economically and socially productive'.<sup>69</sup> Brouillette's attention to these powerful discourses about writers and their motivations and the problems around this, we can see how 'minority writers' conditions of legibility were shaped from above and how they renegotiated them. *Inventory*'s sovereign autonomy involved rejecting

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<sup>63</sup> Sarah Brouillette, 'Literature is Liberalism', 15 October 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/literature-is-liberalism> [Accessed 7 February 2018]

<sup>64</sup> *Inventory* editors quoted in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.33.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

funding from these sources and self-publishing their journal with absolute control over design, printing and, to a certain extent, distribution. Their autonomy therefore was dependent on financial independence and as a result self-rule over the criteria by which contributions were selected for inclusion. Their sovereign control of this criteria therefore excluded them from interaction with the institutions which reproduce the 'literary as an obvious pre-existing category'. On this basis *Inventory* was not *literature* and not a *literary journal*. As a group they did not tend to gravitate towards these literary institutions, nor were these institutions attracted towards them.

From Brouillete's wider analysis of the conditions of what is designated as literature on a global stage we can recover another condition of 'literature' which further excludes *Inventory*. But from the opposite perspective also indicates that *Inventory* were not seeking to write literature i.e. a 'pre-existing category', but something 'whose form we can only guess at'.<sup>70</sup> This condition which is promoted by literary institutions is one of not only hypostatized passivity but self-positioning at a deliberate remove from the society and phenomena literary works describe.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, this art, the art that qualifies as literature is 'art is able to comment on events in the world only to the extent that it can separate itself from those events.'<sup>72</sup> This is self-evidently exclusive of *Inventory*'s fierce sociology: inquiry that seeks to study phenomena 'close-up', to 'catalyse' with that world or become 'part of a potentiality that may have a larger social impact'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Inventory* editors quoted in *Indent*, op. cit., p.33.

<sup>71</sup> 'The literary work is transcendently above those, looking down on them, passing judgment on the petty squabbles of the local combatants. The work does not manifest, embody, or refract social or political relations. It always comments on them from some remove.' 'Literature is Liberalism', op. cit.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> *Inventory*, 'Coagulum', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.4–12, p.10.



Anagrammatization

The recombination of the constitutive elements of an inscription.

Anachronization

The tactical destabilization of time horizons within the common era.

Anti-exoticization

The removal of projected connotations of otherness from foreign markers of cultural filiation.

Antonymaticization

The substitution of one signifier by another signifier with the opposite signified.

Appropriation

The reclaiming of normative English in order to make it bear the burden of an experience of alterity.

Authentification

The deletion of false consciousness from an act of capturing representation.

Binary deconstruction

The inversion or displacement of a received hierarchical opposition.

Bricolage

A form of collage which uses readyfound materials.

Catachresis

The creative restitching of an old signifier to a new signified.

Creolization

Hybridization with a specific Caribbean or South American cultural inflection.

Deauthentification

The relativization of an act of capturing self-representation.

Deidentification

The putting into jeopardy of a capturing subject position.

Delegitimation

The ideological contestation of common sense.

Demarginalization

A deconstruction of the binary opposition between centre and margin which privileges the latter term.

Demodernization

The recovery of continuing primitive or pagan forms within postmodern discourses.

Denationalization

The strategic withdrawal of national identity from a plurally capturing subject position.

Desubjectification

The tactical reification of a capturing subject position.

Disalienation

The exposure of an alienation effect.

Endotization

The strategic exoticization of domestic markers of cultural filiation.

Estrangement

The making strange of the familiar through an act of condensation or displacement.

Ethnicitization

The erasure of racial designations in favour of anthropological constructions of common cultural ancestry.

Ethnofuturization

The invention of an ethnic tradition which serves as the platform for speculative modernization.

Euro-decentralization

The rhizomaticization of European cultural assumptions.

Gender reassignment

The shifting of a gender marker.

Homonymaticization

The substitution of one signifier by another signifier with the same sound.

Image: Steve Beard, 'Anthropofferjism Manifesto', (2000) pp.38-39



# Literature and Publishing as Self-Specification or Self-Determination

Two vectors however allow us to rebalance this picture, one derives from the specification of literary works by Russian formalism, '[t]he science of literary analysis [...] of *literaturnost*', i.e. what was literary about literature.'<sup>74</sup> Steve Beard cites the formalist theory of estrangement in the 'Anthropofferjism Manifesto'.<sup>75</sup> It is, according to formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, a general axiom applicable to art, but which the formalists systematised in literature, 'the purpose of art, then is to lead us to a feeling of things, based on vision and not only on recognition. In order to achieve this goal art relies upon two devices: "estranging" things and complicating form, the latter making perception more difficult and labourious.'<sup>76</sup> Broadly speaking the Russian Formalist approach considers what is literary about literature to be the tendency of literary creations to break with and revise prior conventions in order to specify themselves as works. Beard's 'Manifesto' insists that this technique of 'estrangement' must be applied to works of 'English' literature. It is not only novels that he makes strange, through conceptual montage all sorts of theory and philosophy. It is a strategy pushed to its extreme in this work, but might equally be applied to the conceptual montage of *Inventory*'s method per se, and I will return to reflect on this. With this drift from single essay to the project as an entirety, we may well reflect upon the ways in which all of the content delivered within *Inventory* is regulated by a container which, through its camouflage as a staid journal, *estranges* the expectations of the reader and those of publishing conventions. The estrangement the journal enacts is not restricted to purely formal properties but also governs the arrangement of content and inclusion of types and formats of content. This presentation therefore concentrates the *attention* of its readers' even more strongly upon it, and in doing so forces an interrelation, or an intersectional reading, which reads back and forth between content and container and diagonally between singular contributions. Whilst I do not pretend, given the statements by the editors in the previous chapter, that *Inventory*'s sole interest was to make thing strange, I argue nonetheless here that *Inventory* made strange the journal as a

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<sup>74</sup> Stanley Mitchell, 'From Shklovsky to Brecht: Some Preliminary Remarks towards a History of the Politicisation of Russian Formalism'. *Screen*, Vol.15, No.2, 1974 , p..75.

<sup>75</sup> 'Anthropofferjism Manifesto', op. cit., p.39

<sup>76</sup> Viktor Shklovsky quoted in Carlo Ginzburg, 'Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device'. *Representations*, no. No. 56 (Autumn 1996): 8–28, p.8.

form.<sup>77</sup> *Inventory* elected to both create a system and undermine or interrupt it.

This logic, by which ‘works turn the tables’ has been cogently developed along resonant lines by Roger Chartier in relation to publishing conventions and the history of the book.

Works are produced within a specific order that has its own rules, conventions, and hierarchies, but they escape all these and take on a certain density in their peregrinations – which can be in a very long time span – about the social world. Deciphered on the basis of mental and affective schemes that constitute the ‘culture’ (in the anthropological sense) of the communities that receive them, works turn the tables and become a precious resource for thinking about what is essential: the construction of social ties, individual subjectivity, and relationship with the sacred.<sup>78</sup>

As Chartier describes this movement can encompass ‘peregrinations’ ‘about the social world’, and it did in *Inventory*’s work. However, the restlessness that *Inventory* gave body to can be seen also to apply to themselves, their own conventions. I will now try to look closely across the three formats I have previously identified, the essay, glossary and ‘found texts’ in order to understand both the conventions *Inventory* may have been responding to and the peregrinations they made. An index of further categories supports this work in the Appendices.

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<sup>77</sup> Here Adam Scrivener’s comments are pertinent: ‘I’ve come to believe over the years that art is not meant to be entertaining, we’re here to make things of course pleasurable, you can get pleasure from difficulty and trying to wrestle with things, and maybe not even have anything that arrives at any competent resolution.’ Appendices: Interview with Adam Scrivener.

<sup>78</sup> Roger Chartier, *Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe Between the 14th and 18th Centuries*, (Trans. Lydia G Cochrane), Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994. p.x.

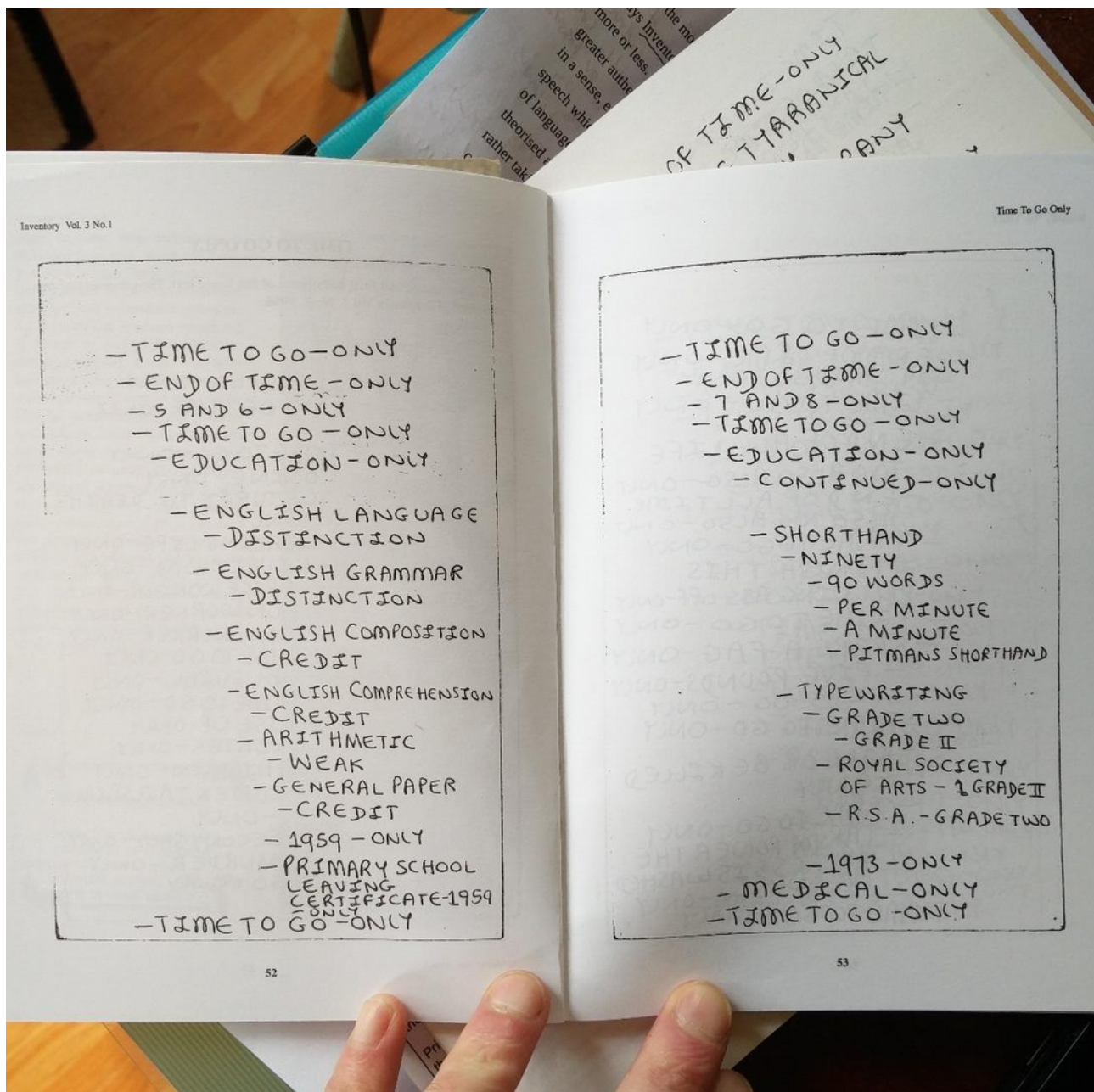


Image: Found Text, 'Time to Go Only', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.52-53.

## Found Texts

This collection of texts is not sectioned off separately, its items appear listed in the main body of the table of contents along with all other essays or within the glossary section. Found Texts can be identified and categorised as such only through their positioning, through their authorial attribution: ‘A Found Text’.<sup>79</sup> Schlegel’s phrases, to ‘lose itself in what it describes’ and be ‘capable in that it organizes’, are perhaps ways which help characterise the unusual literary practice of publishing the writing of unknown others without any apparent hermeneutic framework.<sup>80</sup> We can consider the found texts ‘involuntary submissions’, because although *Inventory* ran an open submission policy, these are the only texts which definitely not written for the context they found themselves published in, nor could the editors retrospectively gain their author’s permission. They were usually found by members of the core editorial group, contributors to the journal, or friends. I argue that it was this marginal writing which though published at a distance, *Inventory* counter-intuitively foregrounds, and investigates. The nature of that investigation was ‘against interpretation’, there is no effort to defend or explain these contributions. Instead they are presented as ‘social facts’ in the style of *Documents*.<sup>81</sup> Respecting *Inventory*’s presentation of them presents substantial obstacles to framing the corpus presented as ‘found texts’ within the journal. There are almost no contemporary theorisations of such writings, existing academic work on this phenomenon tends to have developed out of the institutions of confinement and psychiatry as part of the patient’s notes, an approach impossible to reconstruct in the case of writings found on London’s streets.<sup>82</sup> Existing literature on this phenomenon, such as the writings of

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<sup>79</sup> Exceptions to these rules are as follows: two texts which fit this form are attributed to authors, Joseph the Prophet,, ‘Joseph’s Christian Circus’, *Inventory*, Vol.5, Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.78–89 and Stanley Owen-Green, ‘Eight Passion Proteins With Care’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.13–23; several found texts were included in the Glossary section: ‘Anagram’ Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, p.32; ‘Die’, Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, p.33; ‘Illusions’, Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, p.34; ‘Motto’, A Found Text, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, p.50; ‘Spirits’. Found Text (notes by Daniel Love Peacock), Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.49–51.

<sup>80</sup> Friedrich von Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, op. cit., pp.31–32.

<sup>81</sup> ‘That was the good thing about *Documents*, that it was a bit more hard edged, it had more of an aspect of a total social fact in all of its brute paradoxical unpleasant[ness].’ Appendices: Interview with Adam Scrivener.

<sup>82</sup> In his talk on ‘Aesthetics and Madness’ Caygill notes the how the history of interpretation of art works by mentally ill patients develops from their archiving as evidence of madness within the patient’s notes and poses several interesting questions about how it is possible that we today confront these works as artworks by confined inmates of mental institutions. Howard Caygill, ‘Aesthetics and Madness’, 17 November 2016, <https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2016/11/howard-caygill-aesthetics-and-madness/> [Accessed 14 February, 2018]

psychologist Pierre Janet on ‘automatic writing’ which influenced the surrealists, is fruitful in articulating how the ‘found texts’ act in proximity with *Inventory*’s own writing.<sup>83</sup> However the move to present these texts without commentary or explicit reflection pushes them further away from this surrealist and psychological tradition towards other interpretations or against them. Contemporary accounts tend to organise such writing within a general schema of ‘outsider art’, writing by those with an ‘identification or consignment to a position outside, whether through race or citizenship, sexuality, psychiatric status, or perceived deprivation of personal agency.’<sup>84</sup> *Inventory*’s presentation of similar texts unconfines them in several senses: neither presenting them as aspects of an institutional diagnoses or in their relation to institutions of confinement; nor through interpretation of their meaning; nor speculating on the *identity* of their authors. And, finally, by not separating them from texts in the journal which were published there intentionally. What little commentary does frame these texts, relates to their source: the site, circumstances of their discovery.<sup>85</sup> Given the urban orientation of the journal, as an *Inventory* of the streets they are to be considered phenomena of the street. We might, then, consider the writings assembled and grouped as ‘found texts’ in issues of *Inventory* through the term ‘homeless literature’. This concept would facilitate a meeting point between formulations affirming restlessness and homelessness expressed in texts by the core editorial group of *Inventory* and in the generic and structural homelessness of the found texts. *Inventory* sought to publish them ‘without recourse to a comforting representation of

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<sup>83</sup> ‘Janet, a trained philosopher who became Professor of Psychology at the Collège de France, observed through his clinical work at a Le Havre hospital [...] that hysterical patients had the capacity to manifest thoughts in writing which, due to their illness, they were not otherwise conscious of: “a patient who declares that they cannot remember certain events” could with “involuntary writing” recall them. From this, Janet developed “automatic writing” as a cathartic treatment where, under hypnosis, a patient could write down, if asked, things which they could not consciously remember. Automatic writing could work, Janet reports, only ‘when the patient is in a state of distraction; as soon as they pay any attention to their writing everything stops and the remembrance is no longer obtainable’.’ David Bate, *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2011, pp.59-60. Nick Norton in interview suggests these techniques did inform the way some texts in *Inventory* were generated: ‘[s]ome of the glossary entries also, perhaps like a game of exquisite corpse but with text. We would draw the body of the entry not knowing the others’ input.’ Appendices: Interview with Nick Norton’.

<sup>84</sup> Neubauer Collegium, ‘Outsider Writing: Opening Presentation’, undated, [http://neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu/events/uc/outsider\\_writing\\_opening\\_presentation/](http://neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu/events/uc/outsider_writing_opening_presentation/) [Accessed 24 February, 2018]

<sup>85</sup> For example ‘Time to Go Only’, A Found Text, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.88-100, ‘was discovered in a builders skip some years ago in West London.’ Joseph the Prophet, ‘Joseph’s Christian Circus’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.78-89, ‘These documents were given to *Inventory* on 4/8/96 by Christopher Pinney [lecturer in Social Anthropology at SOAS] In the accompanying letter Pinney states he wasn’t sure where he found them. However, we discovered he had written the following on the reverse of one of the texts; ‘purchased at 10p a sheet from ‘Joseph’ on Commercial Road 24/11/84’.

what we believe we are.’<sup>86</sup> These present the most extraordinary and liminal writing practices, they are not hierarchically organised beneath the essays *Inventory* published by commissioned or unsolicited contributors but treated the same, more or less. There are questions as to whether the fetishisation of the handwritten distinguishes them as bearing a greater authenticity than other written contributions to the journal. Making them *documents* in a sense, evidence of something as yet unknown, unexplicated – perhaps of communicative speech which is as yet unassimilable to discourse.

A perspective, based on the philosophy of language, might understand these texts as falling into a category Jean-Jacques Lecercle has theorised as *délire*. In his definition: ‘*délire* is a perversion which consists in interfering, or rather taking risks, with language.’<sup>87</sup> *Délire* does not negate language as an instrument of communication, but testifies to both the failures of language to express what we mean and its ability to express too much.<sup>88</sup>

*Délire*, then, is at the frontier between two languages, the embodiment of the contradiction between them. Abstract language is systematic [...] an instrument of control, mastered by a regulating subject. Material language, on the other hand, is unsystematic, a series of noises, private to individual speakers, not meant to promote communication [...].<sup>89</sup>

Indeed several of the found texts are exemplary of these two tendencies and slippage between them, ‘Time to Go Only’, a text published across two issues in instalments, is comprised by a seemingly endless list which both mirrors abstract language (system) and deranges it through the listing, and therefore associating, heterogeneous phenomena, events, activities, personalities in an interminable sequence for which no stable criteria or category can be found.<sup>90</sup> The presentation of handwritten originals can be seen as establishing the authenticity of the documents, a claim made on occasion by the editors themselves. This approach can also

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<sup>86</sup> ‘Outlier’, op. cit., p.5.

<sup>87</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire*, London; Melbourne; Sydney; Auckland; Johannesburg: Hutchinson, 1985, p.16.

<sup>88</sup> *Inventory*’s celebration, in the context of anthology about artists’ books, of a found text, or book work, not reproduced in the journal, ‘an annual whose every page had been obscured by images of ships [...] each contributing to the erasure of all previous content’, is exemplary of the tendency of these texts towards the erasure, obliteration or general aggression towards other texts or sign systems. Damian Abbott (*Inventory*), ‘Inventory’, Maria Fusco, and Ian Hunt (Eds.), *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*. London: Bookworks, 2004, p.183.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.44.

<sup>90</sup> A Found Text, ‘Time to go Only’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.88–100 and Found Text, ‘Time to Go Only’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.51–65.

be seen as a true to the original formal organisation of the writing, an attempt to re-present its first medium in facsimile and an emphasis of the presentation in the journal as a given reproduction of a singular document. This is particularly relevant to the published drawings and transcriptions of pages created by Joseph the Prophet, whose writing tends to merge into mark making, iconographic script which itself is so repetitive as to appear machinic, mimetic of typewriting and allegorical of the diminution of the human body by industrial technology. Joseph's diagrams describe two systems both 'state capitalist' in nature, 'the GT Eastern State Idol' faces 'the GT Western Pagan Idol', in each human life is reduced to a squiggly grapheme representing sperm or species, respectively put to work as cogs driving the wheels of the system or crowded and distorted into obedient supplication beneath a profane idol. In an editorial, through which *Inventory*'s editors restate their central concerns and renew their research programme, they invoke *délire* and its study directly: '[w]e must know more about psychobabble, glossolalia, the remarkably common occurrence of talking in tongues. We must know something of the widespread experience and use of ecstatic states.'<sup>91</sup> If the attempt to present these texts by outsiders with the minimum of mediation or interpretation is to be understood in relation with *Inventory*'s editorial championing of heterophilia and immediacy, then it is possible that the Editorials represent the interpretive framework by which the Found Texts should be read. If, in *Inventory*'s system, the Found Texts then represent an opposing pole to the notional abstraction represented by the Glossary, then how does the inclusion of Found Texts in the glossary disturb this opposition? If other visionary and prophetic texts are authored in *Inventory*, including within the Editorials designated usually for unifying editorial directives, how is their intentionality then valued in comparison to the spontaneity and immediacy of these 'found' others? However, these involuntary submissions do have their own specific and quite often innovative layouts themselves, despite typed transcription these are preserved as far as is possible through the reproduction of the handwritten originals. In turn, other innovative layout formats, essays, some of which incorporate 'found' elements, tend to enter into relation with the strangeness of these found texts, even appearing at times as mimetic of textual register and other qualities.<sup>92</sup> As a publishing practice it is a form of collection and investigation which is mimetic and transformative, through its assemblage

<sup>91</sup> 'Do You Feel Crushed', op. cit., pp.7-8.

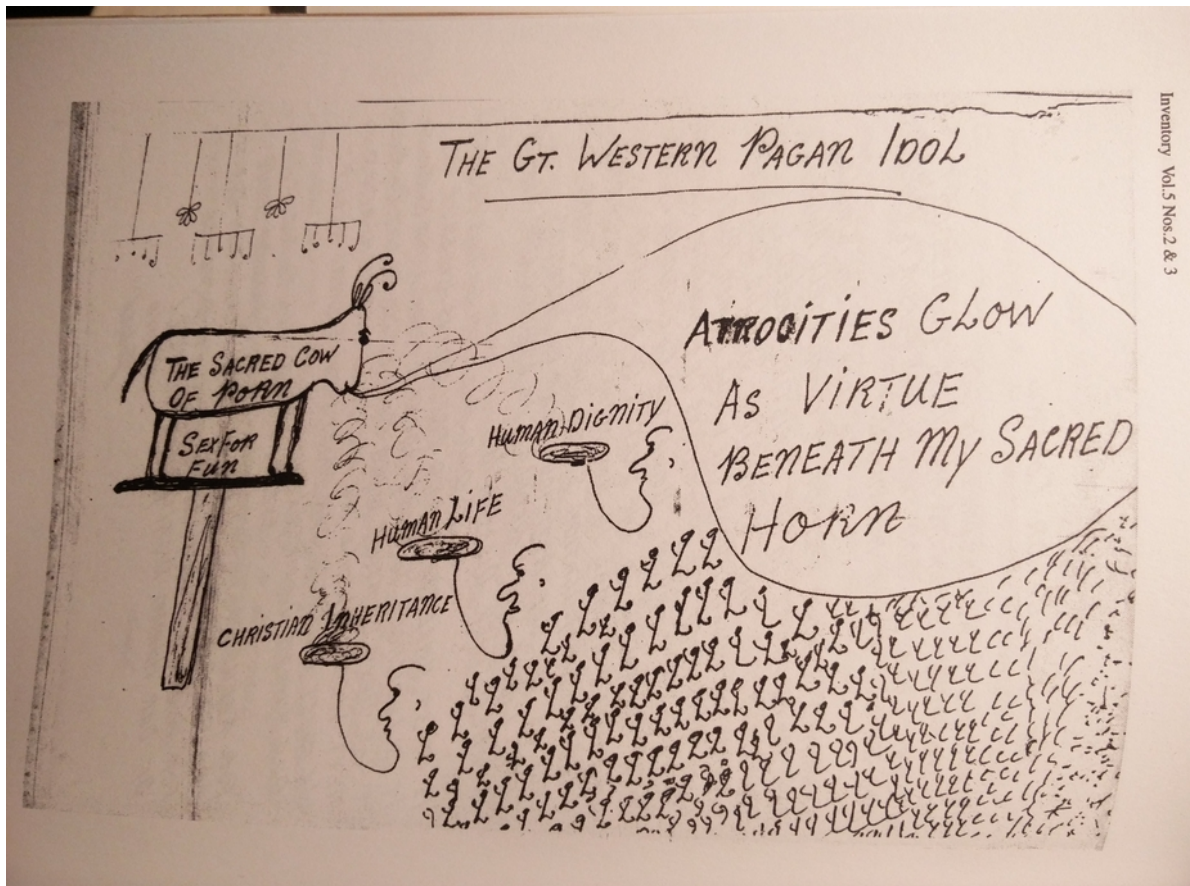
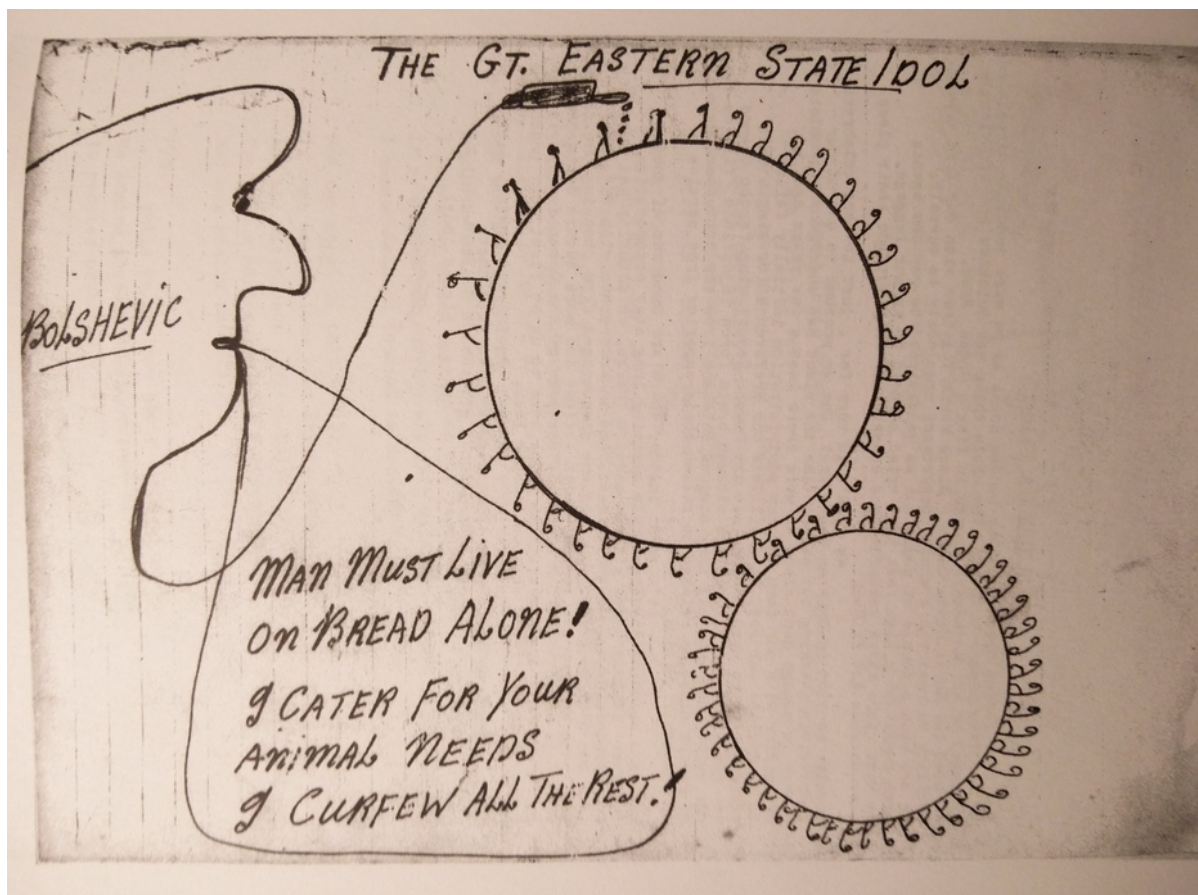
<sup>92</sup> E.g. Richard Bradbury, 'Granted Ground', Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.43-73; Steven Claydon & Neil Chapman, 'The Opposite of a Good Idea', Vol.3 No.2 1999, n.p; John Cussans, 'The Shining Maze', Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.118-121; Steve Beard, 'Dead London', Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.15-30; Damian Abbott, 'Paper Assembly', Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.78-83; Nick Norton, 'Metalanguistica: Siege', Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.7-19; Victoria Halford, 'Contract', Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.94-97; Victoria Halford & Steve Beard, 'Torture Cell Tapes', Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.52-74; Steve Beard, 'Jack the Mack Prophecies', Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.144-149; *Inventory*, 'An Impossible Project', Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, 150-161; *Inventory*, 'I WANT MORE LIFE FUCKER', Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.4-7; among others),



(with other contributions, essays and published projects) undermines the authorising frameworks of presentation and text, or text and commentary in favour of a levelling of these modes of writing alongside each other. They are posed as all equally homeless: 'Without foundation, without principle or logic – without a home.'<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Inventory, 'Outlier', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.4-7, p.5



Images: Joseph the Prophet, 'Joseph's Christian Circus', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2&3, 2005

# The Essay as Form

Whilst exploring romantic themes and romantic aspirations of interdisciplinarity *Inventory's* commitment to playing with the insignia and methods of science (here through the basic tools of writing and publishing) to the ends of developing a 'science of ourselves' looked to overcome problems of objective knowledge by collapsing inquiry into its object.

This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death.

The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity [...] in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character.<sup>94</sup>

Whilst the 'lack of security' risked by the essay form might be understood to be compensated for by the rigid, 'academic' and serious exterior appearance of the journal, *Inventory's* commitment to experiment was determined to risk 'erring' at every level of its enterprise. For Adorno, identity involves thinking in concepts – thinking automatically – whereas the essay 'thinks conjointly'.<sup>95</sup> In their final editorial *Inventory* argued that 'essay can also be used to mean a trial or to test, to make an attempt, or to set forth on some act or adventure.'<sup>96</sup> 'Thinking conjointly' could be considered then a form of group adventure, of 'writing in common', or a kind of perceptual caution, refusing to fix things, refusing interpretation. But equally, *Inventory*, argue that '[p]ublishing is a necessary adjunct to the process of interpreting and understanding.'<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless this process of 'interpreting and understanding' is carried out with a view to the fragility and historical nature of existing social categories: it 'is also done in the knowledge that the consensus reality of work, tradition, and nuclear family is really a fragile agglomeration of groupings and exchanges.'<sup>98</sup> *Inventory's* editors emphasised the essay as but one of the 'diverse formats' the group made 'presentation[s] of material' in.<sup>99</sup> Arguing for the fragmentary or incomplete state of their overall enterprise and therefore drawing analogy with the fragmentary form of the essay, one which never amounted to 'a

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<sup>94</sup> 'The Essay as Form', op. cit., p.9 and p.13

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>96</sup> *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.6

<sup>97</sup> *Inventory* (Damian Abbott), 'Inventory', op. cit.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> *Inventory* quoted in *Indent*, p.33.

product'.<sup>100</sup> The editors concluded, if one root meaning of essay is an attempt, then, 'Inventory are essayists'.<sup>101</sup> Through the essay meaning and interpretation is built up incrementally and this reflects the same gradual process of the journal's cathedral-like craftsmanship, an overall plan which takes shape under the innovations of individual and small collectivities' contributions.

The essay itself in *Inventory*'s pages forms its own diversity. 'Paper Assembly' by Damian Abbott is constituted almost entirely by quotations and film stills, a few lines towards the end of the text offer its only apparent commentary: 'by placing fragments of the past like barricades across the roads of the present, one could disrupt the illusion of an unbroken and authoritative history.'<sup>102</sup> A similar approach, though with an epistolary twist, is taken by Giorgio Agostini in 'Sites for a Sound Piece', though rather than materials collaged from books this textual collage deploys edited fragments from online forums and mailing lists retaining elements of their original formatting such as message headers, however the essay provides no internal justification nor explication of its method.<sup>103</sup> evoL PsychogeogrAphix's 'A Collection Of Emails' provides a timely collage of emails regarding the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and subsequent global events. Bolded headers including dates, subject headers and semi-anonymised addresses emphasise the differing political positions, confusion, polemics and humour unfolding over a short space of time through the careful selective organisation of a text of texts.<sup>104</sup> These are collections of existing non-essay texts, but their speculative qualities offer a conceptual transformation of the material they assemble, this and their publication flanked by essays licenses their acceptance as extensions of the essay form. Richard Bradbury's contribution entitled 'Granted Ground' takes the form of a 'roaming around amongst words': the lengthwise or longitudinal thread of the essay (the warp) is punctuated by the weft of keywords arranged in the left margin and separated from the main text by a vertical line inscribed on the page.'<sup>105</sup> These non-linear marginalia remember both the glosses of medieval manuscripts and the coming era of hypertext facilitated by the development of HTML and the architecture of the internet. Exploring the possibilities of code, role-playing games and hypertext, John Cussans sole contribution to *Inventory* journal took the form of a double page insert printed horizontally across two facing pages and incorporating textual blocks and headers arranged both left to right and right to left oriented by code-like and topographical headers, thus requiring the reader to turn the printed object 180 degrees to read the integrated blocks of text.<sup>106</sup> Text is spatialised in such a way as to

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<sup>100</sup> 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', op. cit., p.6.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Damian Abbott, 'Paper Assembly', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.78-83.

<sup>103</sup> Giorgio Agostini, 'Sites for a Sound Piece', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3, 2002, pp.50-68.

<sup>104</sup> evoL PsychogeogrAphix, 'A Collection Of Emails Around 11/9/01', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.98-122.

<sup>105</sup> Richard Bradbury, 'Granted Ground', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.43-73.

<sup>106</sup> John Cussans, 'The Shining Maze', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.118-119.

provide a corollary for the reflections on the experience of the city as a text published elsewhere in *Inventory*. ‘The Opposite of a Good Idea’ by Steven Claydon and Neil Chapman strained the paper architecture of the journal itself towards horizontal extension and incoherence. The essay took the form of a fold-out intervention of six pages breaking entirely with the one or two column standard format of regular issues of *Inventory*, exploring non-human spatial paradigms in an assembly of diagrams, variable typographies and quotations.<sup>107</sup> Despite listing as the last entry of the table of contents, the pages are located in the centre of the journal. Such texts can be discussed in terms of collages of existing textual sources, but also their ‘diagrammatic’ qualities.<sup>108</sup> Since a stated intent is to undermine narrative flow and authority, we are led to consider what sense or knowledge might be made without the given structuring textual architectures. A series of contributions to the journal by Steve Beard and Victoria Halford, sometimes in collaboration, collaged Beard’s own experimental novels alongside associated proposals, quotations from works of critical theory, novels and philosophy, Halford’s installations, fictional or facsimile technical manuals, employment documents and reports.<sup>109</sup>

According to Adorno the essay approaches concepts in a way which is opposed diametrically to the dictionary, to identity thinking as represented by concepts and categories. But as an opponent to the dictionary, the ‘reader’ who writes the essay grasps concepts intuitively ‘[i]f he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed’, therefore ‘the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion.’<sup>110</sup> I therefore argue that the essay is opposed to ‘dictionary’ just as the Glossary is opposed to dictionary, the glossary builds up

<sup>107</sup> Steven Claydon & Neil Chapman, ‘The Opposite of a Good Idea’, *Inventory*, (listed as pp.94-, unpaginated), Vol.3 No.2 1999.

<sup>108</sup> Johanna Drucker, ‘Diagrammatic Writing’. *New Formations*, no. No.78 (2013): pp.83–101. See the discussion of Drucker’s concept in Chapter 2.

<sup>109</sup> Steve Beard, ‘Anthropofferjism Manifesto’, op. cit.,; Victoria Halford & Steve Beard, ‘Torture Cell Tapes’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.54-74; Steve Beard, ‘Autocatalytic Art’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.32-44; Steve Beard & Victoria Halford, ‘Golems’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.56-71; Victoria Halford, ‘Selfedee’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.124-136 and Steve Beard, ‘Jack the Mack Prophecies’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.144-149.

<sup>110</sup> ‘The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behavior of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules learned in school. Such a person will read without a dictionary. If he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed, which are usually too narrow in relation to the changes that occur with changing contexts and too vague in relation to the unmistakable nuances that the context gives rise to in every individual case. This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death.’ ‘The Essay as Form’, op. cit., p.13.

concepts intuitively, *Inventory*'s glossary, its concatenation of glosses, are built up like mini-essays, forming partisan definitions with attention to the 'continually changing contexts' of specific words as social facts.<sup>111</sup> The Glossary over time begins to look like a system, albeit one which 'betrays itself'<sup>112</sup>, where the accumulation of essays forms moments of intensity 'makes [itself] into an arena for intellectual experience' 'interwoven as in a carpet'.<sup>113</sup> The combination of the essays, the Glossary and the found texts in *Inventory* therefore forms a fragmentary unity through which each section attacks the self-sufficiency of categories and experience from different sides of a formal divide which has served to enforce the idea that 'what has been produced historically is not a fit object of theory'.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>112</sup> 'The Method of a Fierce Sociology', op. cit., p.4. (Emphasis in the original).

<sup>113</sup> 'The Essay as Form', op. cit., p.13.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



QUADRANT ONE: Battle & Laboratory > the DEATHTIME mirror

(f) According to which Being is associated with a complexity in which it loses itself (i.e. the labyrinth - with something reflecting appearances in it).

I can acknowledge, if necessary, that starting from [à partir de - '43 ong.] an extreme complexity, being imposed on reflection more than the precariousness of an elusive [l'élusiv - '43 ong.] appearance, but this complexity - increasing little by little [rélevant de degré en degré - '43 ong.] - becomes in turn the labyrinth where what had suddenly come forward strangely loses its way (à s'égarer - '43 ong.).

(II)  
According to which Being (the 'constitution' of which defines the '43 labyrinth') is lost and then found somewhere between the summit of a pyramid and its labyrinthine base.

"Being the world is so uncertain that I can project it where I want - outside of me. It is a clumsy man [homme maladroit - '43 orig.], still incapable of unravelling the essential plot [ne sut pas déjouer l'intrigue essentielle - '43 orig.] who limited being to the self [Têtu au moi - '43 orig.]. Being is in fact found NOWHERE and it was an easy game for a sickly malice to discover it to be divine, at the summit of a pyramid formed by the multitude of beings, which has at its base the immensity of simplest matter."

(iii)  
According to which tracing the routes of "being mediated by words" gives a vision of a human being's labyrinthine structure.

'Being depends on the mediation of words, which cannot merely present it arbitrarily as "autonomous being", but which must present it profoundly as "being-in-relation" [*être en rapport* - '43 orig.]. It suffices to follow, for a short time, the traces of the repeated circuits [*parcours repetés* - '43 orig.] of words to discover, in a disconcerting vision, the labyrinthine structure of being.'

There is a perplexing difference between the '36 and '43 texts which gravitates around the mirror in the centre of the labyrinth. Between those dates something that had 'suddenly come on the scene' and then 'strangely lost its way' had become a thing which 'wanders endlessly' and then 'loses itself once and for all'. What was it that came strangely and/or suddenly onto the scene of extreme complexity? Is it more than that which 'being imposed on reflection', is the 'elusive appearance of being'? Is it being's reflection? And why 'more'? What kind of reflection is *Stagnation*, reflection to *2 Memory*, to *2000*? 'Fusion' and 'fission'.

QUADRANT THREE - EXU Intersection EXIT HERE >

[illegible]

are imagistic terms, suggesting a thing seen; something 'appeared' on the scene'. But 'fugitive' suggests a thing on the run, in hiding, lost. Whatever it was, by '43 the 'sudden strangeness' of the thing (which was more than the elusive, fleeting, fugitive apparition which being had imposed on reflection) was no longer significant. It is as if, between '36 and '43, the initial shock of encounter with the thing that wanders the labyrinth had faded. Now 'if merely wanders, loses its way in the ever increasing complexity: "Il s'égare"

(9)  
In *Bataille's spatial imagination the labyrinth is the pyramid's architectural anti-thesis and its material base. The pyramid has inherited from the function of the labyrinth the same 'sacred' Order, Divine Unity and an abstract trinitarian form of Spirit. It also functions as a metaphor which parallels the solo-tropic endeavours of human labour with those of plants and animals. The arduous labour of erecting the pyramid is like the plant's slow matter-matter towards the ideal plane of solar unity, it was while escaping the labyrinth with his father Daedalus, the labyrinth's architect, that Icarus met his fate). The pyramid is also the plane of ontological sacrifice in Bataille's commentaries on the Colosseum: 'The Colosseum is the theatre of the sacrifice of the sun and from the pyramid the sun is fed on the blood of human sacrifice. At the summit multiple beings are terminated to secure the perpetuation of a higher singular being. Such unrestrained violence of human waste (potential labour) serves to perpetuate the life of the singular being, the cosmic order. The pyramid also functions as a metaphor for the loss of*

social organization which vertically stratify social divisions from the singularity most high at the summit to multiply most low at the base. The Pyramid figure is both concretely historical and abstractly trans-historical. In both cases it exists as an interface between planes of cosmic and terrestrial matter, energy enabling Battelle to represent

[illegible]

**QUADRANT TWO**  
**Somme > St. Martin**  
**Somme - A river in N.W.**  
**France. During WW**  
**the German army was**  
**driven back from here**  
**by the French and**  
**English armies, July 1**  
**1916. Labyrinth is the**  
**name of a fortified**  
**position southeast of**  
**Neuville St. Vaast, N.**  
**France, scene of heavy**  
**fighting in 1915 during**  
**WW1. The city of**  
**Rheims is in this**  
**region. It was here that**  
**Battale abandoned his**  
**father, the German**  
**approached. The cathe-**  
**dral of Rheims was the**  
**subject of Battale's**  
**earliest writings.**  
**During the Middle Ages**  
**mazes or labyrinths**  
**were often indicated**



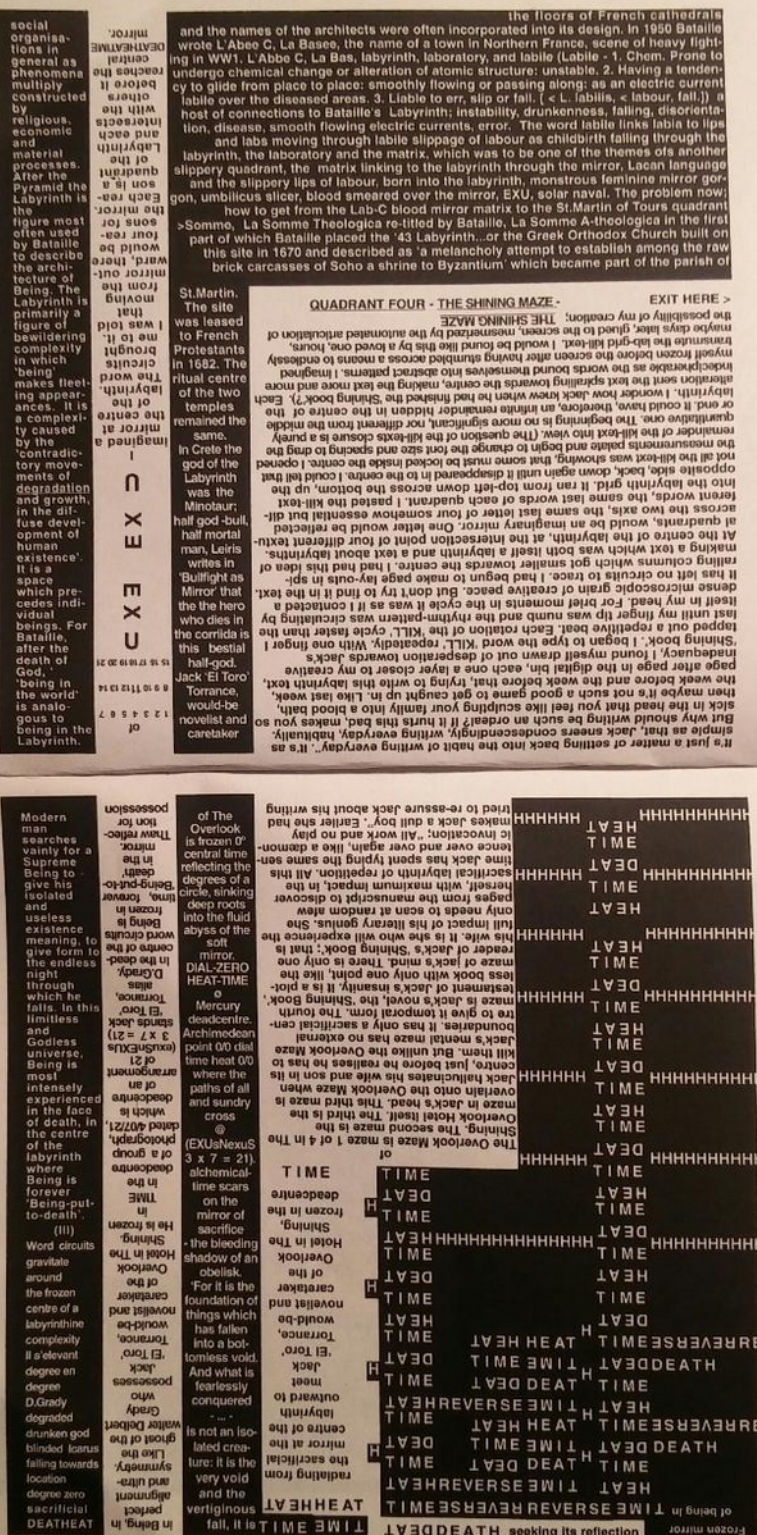


Image: John Cussans, 'The Shining Maze', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2 2001, p.119





## Glossary: Writing in Common

Across a tension between diffusion via sheer eclecticism and the concentration of an independent vision the glossary section of *Inventory* provides fertile ground for the development of a speculative project of 'writing in common'.<sup>115</sup> Yet, as I have stressed before, *Inventory*'s glossary worked because of the combination of rigidity, dynamism and eclecticism of its setting. There are of course other reasons it worked: consistently interesting writing, humour, shifting viewpoints, surprise approaches to the seemingly banal and mundane. Within the glossary the tag team of Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Paul Claydon, Adam Scrivener and Damian Abbott appear to form a central axis. This crew engaged in what could be understood as building a small-scale 'republic of letters' across the pages and between the spines of *Inventory* journal, a teetering edifice lunging downwards into the microscopic detail of everyday life ('Waiting', 'Material denture', 'Scum', 'Fare Dodging', 'Estate Map', 'Kebabed') as well as looming upwards towards starry or heavenly realms ('Spirits', 'UFO', 'God', 'The Sun', 'Mythology'). One imagines a parallel network between these texts, of correspondence, emails, meetings in pubs accelerated by laughter, chance connections, bonds which remained social, threading writing in and out of social and personal experiences. Here a society of correspondence could refer both to the literal and concrete material communications between authors and editors, and something harder to grasp: a set of changing relations, resemblances, similarities, connections networked together by common experiences and conditions. Novalis' expectation that '[o]ne day, perhaps, we will write, think, and act collectively.' has been achieved, but it is not evidence of 'great progress', but rather what is progressive pushing against the grain, what, in humanity, demands more from the limits imposed on it by 'what we call progress'.<sup>116</sup>

The Glossary was also the stuff of school-boy humour, demonstrating the resilient subversion of concepts stuffed into one by formal education, taking pleasure in the bringing down to earth of the lofty and the elevation into theory of the low.<sup>117</sup> This acknowledgement may seem to diminish the seriousness of the Glossary. However, bureaucracy and humour (or literature) should not necessarily be counterposed as opposites. Bureaucracy itself was a pun between an

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<sup>115</sup> Novalis quoted in Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, (trans. Susan Howard), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.358.

<sup>116</sup> Novalis quoted in *Ibid.*, p.358. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in Benjamin, Walter. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Michael W Jennings. (Trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland), Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp.389-400, p.392.

<sup>117</sup> For example a chance encounter with a used 'very mangy vibrator' is the occasion for reflections on a theory of value. P.C. (Paul Claydon), 'Material denture', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1999, p.49.

item of office furniture and the form of state, following Grimm's coining of *bureamania* by a few years, 'the idea that the state had become manic was an important trope.'<sup>118</sup> Its delay, suspension or stalling of human desire itself provides for opportunities for humour. In the rapid circulation of the term 'the primary vehicles for the term's dissemination were not political or philosophical treatises, but popular literature.'<sup>119</sup>

The story of 'bureaucracy' – all of our jokes, anecdotes, complaints, even our occasional stories of triumph – is a story of this desire that is not reducible to a need or demand. It is the story of how paperwork, even when it works, fails us.<sup>120</sup>

Systems and their failures to subordinate us, or their objects, is indeed then a constantly revisited starting point for *Inventory*. It is in this light that we can read *Inventory*'s deep engagement with what Kafka calls bureaucracy's 'mythopoetic potential', their attack on the dictionary as a 'rattling of the semiotic chain', to quote Lacan.<sup>121</sup> In artistic terms, the impossibility of carrying out a practice without that forming over time a system, or through time being elaborated as a system by the institutions of art, criticism and the museum, was a concern *Inventory* shared not only with conceptual art, but with the most exemplary restless pursuers and worriers of this specific problem, Art & Language. However, through *Inventory*'s practice we can pose the question of what is this dynamic when it is turned outwards? I.E. when it is not a strategic hermetic game to keep the 'art world' out but where the world in all its strangeness is invited in to disturb the conventions developed for its containment?

## The Journal as Form

Under Bataille's editorial direction the collaborative 'Critical Dictionary' in *Documents* became a method of paper assembly, of cohering and associating dissent into a critical and material force. Subsequently Bataille used his editorial and organising techniques in formations which had both a basis in publishing projects and outside of them. These models then, for *Inventory*, posed the question of conventions and of composition not only in terms of editorial organisation but of the

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<sup>118</sup> Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, Cambridge Mass.: Zone Books and MIT Press, 2012, p.82.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.79

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>121</sup> *The Demon of Writing*, op. cit., p.85 and p.77.

reorganisation of human community in sovereign (i.e. self-organised) terms. The glossary, a microcosm of, and index to the journal itself, was a way of convening a loose ‘republic of letters’. For *Inventory* the question and problems of ‘composing ourselves’ is strongly associated with both writing and publishing, but guided by Bataille and necessitated by Benjamin’s philosophy of experience, can be understood to be informed by the project proposed by Howard Slater, that of ‘compos[ing] our own social relation[s]’.<sup>122</sup>

Whereas a dictionary or encyclopaedia aspires towards comprehensiveness, a glossary is only ‘partial’ and tends towards the interpretive. In this way, the sense of shock, partiality and multiple perspectives cohered by the contemporary city becomes a model for the unity of fragmentary views presented by *Inventory* journal. One form unifying both the book and the city is the commodity form which subjects both to its form determination. In this sense then we can understand *Inventory* journal as a commodity which is the product of the experience of commodification. *Inventory*’s response to experience of commodification is to reason with it through criticism. Criticism can be related etymology to crisis and it is for this reason that it is tempting to pose *Inventory* as a form of ‘crisis literature’.<sup>123</sup> Where postmodernist critics argued that a view of the whole is made impossible in late-capitalism, *Inventory* contrarily insisted on producing a totality – a unity of presentation – consisting of fragments written by themselves in differing formations with friends and strangers in differing formations.

If the particular wears itself out fighting<sup>124</sup> *Inventory*’s partisanship against the abstract or the total unity of capital, and its movement towards totalisation, fought its ground on the basis of the part or particular.<sup>125</sup> Though one must consider the Glossary, and the Journal itself, as a

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<sup>122</sup> Flint Michigan, ‘Composing Ourselves’, 10 April 2001, [Accessed 10/10/2018], <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/composing-ourselves> As discussed, Slater’s ‘New Acephale’ has a strong resonance with the development of clandestine and open group form with *Inventory*.

<sup>123</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Crisis’. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, No.2, 2006, pp.357–400.

<sup>124</sup> ‘whereas all particular commodities wear themselves out in the fight, the commodity as abstract form continues on its way to absolute self-realization.’ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), New York: Zone Books, 2012, p.43.

<sup>125</sup> In *Inventory* the connection between partial, part, particular and partisan is relevant since the gloss as a kind of interpretation or projection, here meets the piercing of the partisan’s weapon (a pike) and the division inherent in parting. ‘glossary, n., a collection of glosses; a partial dictionary. — L. glossarium, ‘vocabulary of antiquated or foreign words, glossary’, formed with suff. -drium, fr. glossa. See gloss, ‘inter-pretation’, and subst. suff. -ary. Derivative: glossari-al, adj.’ Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language: Dealing with the Origin of Words and Their Sense Development Thus Illustrating the History of Civilization and Culture*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 2003, p.315.

collection or static repository, the Glossary is neither complete nor completist. It is not marked by the effort towards completion that either an encyclopaedia or dictionary implies. The gloss and glossary maintains its relation to the spoken word and the utterance as singular event of speech. In the Glossary ‘utterance’ and ‘complicit understanding’ are distinguished from mere written words.<sup>126</sup> The marvellous is found in the everyday, ‘[t]he truly marvellous dwells in a norm’.<sup>127</sup> The Glossary drew its vitality and energy from being a space where words could be isolated from their habitual meanings, these shock experiences then collectivised, shared, it would instead become a workshop where ‘writing in common’ took place and an ‘unconditional synthesis of experience’ could develop.<sup>128</sup>

Surrealism collects events that, to the extent that they are unconscious, function as interruptions of historical process. The Surrealists wanted to establish an archive not of history but of its rupture, not of narrative but of its other.<sup>129</sup>

For the Romantics and Surrealist and equally for *Inventory* the fragment is related to history, but through revolutionary interruption presents a challenge to the continuum of time and the status quo: ‘by placing fragments of the past like barricades across the roads of the present’ *Inventory* sought to disrupt and explode not only the authority of the past but its continuum into the future.<sup>130</sup> *Inventory* opposed ‘any object as meaningful in isolation and would mistrust any serial arrangement or permanent fixing of things’. Each object was therefore situated in direct dialogue with human action and experience.<sup>131</sup> In order to develop a discourse unhoused by disorder, *Inventory* worked intimately with systems of classification and archetypes of order as artistic material to critique and ‘systemically’ undermine them: the dictionary/glossary, architecture and house. These systems or representations of stable order are exposed to the potential of a Heraclitan flux:

Each action, each movement I make is accompanied by a pounding surf of atoms, yielding vast troughs and swells, in cataclysmic vacuums, to even the slightest of my gestures; in a whorl of conscious and physical change [...].<sup>132</sup>

This rhetorical invocation of an atomic sublime games, destabilises and threatens any putative order

<sup>126</sup> Faculty of Transient Identity, ‘Nice’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, p.72.

<sup>127</sup> Jacques Rigaut, ‘Marvellous’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, p.72.

<sup>128</sup> “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’”, op. cit., p.63.

<sup>129</sup> Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008, p.96.

<sup>130</sup> Damian Abbott, ‘Paper Assembly’, op. cit.

<sup>131</sup> *Inventory*, ‘Inventory: Cool, Calm and ...’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.4-7, p.4.

<sup>132</sup> *Inventory*, ‘Outlier’, *Inventory*, Vol.4, No.3, 2002, pp.4-7.

at the level of human representation. Such statements parallel the smaller iterative subversions of Glossary entries which open the stable ordering systems of established vocabulary to singular experience and action. The journal developed its unity from fragmentary writings which taking their cue from a methodological combination of subjectivity and objectivity, ‘an approach to phenomena in close up [...] which, rather than taking material phenomena as a given, would seize an object and reconstellate it’.<sup>133</sup> *Inventory* as a whole can ultimately be envisaged as a kind of Suprematist collage of theoretical trajectories which each explored as ground are stable enough to be navigated on foot, these are articulated and connected so as to make it possible to cross from one plane to another which abuts it from a slightly different angle. It is only when one draws back or looks up that one realises that this complex structure, consisting of many planes with many surfaces colliding into and puncturing each other, that seeing the surrounding black space and pin pricks of stars shining through it, one realises that this object is also moving through time and space. This is an centripetal image of the journal akin to Antonio Negri’s view of journals as ‘*continually reaching out and pulling in*’ and ‘*absorbing everything in the world around it*’.<sup>134</sup> In this view, *Inventory* is a central repository, where the elements from without are drawn in and organised. However, Negri’s metaphor of the journal-octopus is apt, the journal must move in an environment and bend towards its objects, as a freeze frame sequence of images it may appear as entirely different shapes at each instant, a mobile network of relations attached to objects at different points in space and time.

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<sup>133</sup> *Inventory*, ‘Press release for *Inventory* Vo.1 No.1. Chelsea School of Art Archives, *Inventory* Archive, undated (c.1994-5).

<sup>134</sup> Antonio Negri (discussing *Futur Anterior*), Antonio Negri, ‘Postface to the Complete Text of the Journal *Futur Antérieur* (1989–98)’, [multitudes.samizdat.net/Postface-to-the-Complete](http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Postface-to-the-Complete)



# **Chapter 6**

## **Phantom Organisations and Collective Exits: Inventory at Info Centre**

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# Introduction

## Communities, Ensembles, Clusters

Chapter 1 established *Inventory*'s interest in '[a]ll forms of communities, ensembles of data, clusters which encircle around a myriad of principles; of thoughts and feelings, which find themselves coagulating, forming knots and drifts'.<sup>1</sup> This formulation establishes *Inventory*'s attraction to community as an 'object', something worthy of knowledge, study and research. It also qualifies this, suggesting both the substance of communities: 'principles; of thoughts and feelings' and forms through which to think communities: 'coagulating, forming knots and drifts'. A deliberate slippage between 'communities, ensembles, data' suggests that people and 'things' are mixed up together. Chapter 3 argued that the determinate subject object relations operative in capitalist society confuses people, things and values, human values and value in the capitalist sense. From this perspective, the human is the mere 'bearer' for an alien process of capital accumulation. In contradistinction to this state of affairs *Inventory* chose to affirm and place human community and 'human will' centrally to a project of research and study of society: 'a sociology embracing the marginal and the everyday, the theoretical and the base'.<sup>2</sup> Another perspective, established by Chapters 2 and 3, enables us to understand that *Inventory* perceived their journal itself as a form of community and this is reiterated in a number of publications, extraneous to the journal itself, exploring the convergence of artistic approaches to publishing and self-publishing:

Deliberate publication implies a perceived community; a community of readers, of contributors, and an exchange between the two.'<sup>3</sup>

Here I develop the question of community in relation to *Inventory* in terms of a concrete space, the discursive community it was associated with and a speculative and dispersed community of publishing initiatives. I discuss informal spaces of community and socialisation as well as formal spaces of display and mediatic space. In this Chapter I intend to investigate and characterise the 'communities' or 'ensembles' *Inventory* themselves directly engaged with, using the example of a concrete space where they met a readership, engaged new contributors and experimented with other

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1 'Do You Feel Crushed', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8.

2 Direct quotations from *Inventory*, 'I Want More Life Fuckers', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2, 1999, pp.4-7, p.4 and 'Inventory Questionnaire' in Virginia Nimarkoh, *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, Camberwell: the Camberwell Press, 1999, p.34.

3 Damian Abbott (*Inventory*), Maria Fusco, and Ian Hunt (Eds.), *Put About: A Critical Anthology of Independent Publishing*, London: Bookworks, 2004, p.183.

like-minded groups – ‘coagulating, forming knots and drifts’ – engaged in debates around group form, critical culture and self-publishing. Space must be understood as *produced*.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that in the temporary project space Info Centre, *Inventory* found a catalysing context for their work which radicalises our understanding of their project. This is reflected in debates staged in the journal, *Inventory*, and the arguments and theorisations developing from encounters at this space provide a meaningful context through which to interpret *Inventory*’s activity and that of other ‘ensembles’ as a movement both concentrating and distributive.<sup>5</sup> *Inventory*’s participation and influence co-produced the space, though not singularly, therefore Info Centre should be understood as a concentrating space or ‘field of intensity’ in which many energies contributed to producing it as an environment and as a discursive space.<sup>6</sup> Info Centre, as ‘a ground for discussion and an exchange of ideas’ was the site for the origination and development of concepts which help us further our understanding of the material conditions for cultural production in London and the agency of culture in the development of and opposition to neoliberal capitalism.<sup>7</sup> The concepts: ‘self-institution’; ‘phantom organisation’; ‘exodus’ or ‘exit’; ‘auto-theorisation’ and ‘post-media’ provide us with articles of ‘lateral association’ between the collective practices assembled at Info Centre; as well as models which facilitate the description and deeper understanding of *Inventory*’s practice; that of ‘self-publishing’ as a practice more generally and the broader understanding of capitalism and cultural resistance to capitalism.<sup>8</sup> This spirit of opposition galvanised at Info Centre articulated itself in relation to a global protest movement and a sequence of events where many of

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4 This assertion is developed further in the subsequent Chapter. Cf. My discussion of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space in Chapter 5.

5 To emphasise this sense of movement within this chapter I will attempt to layout some historical markers for the measurement of dynamic environment change and generation of events in the short period between the inception of Info Centre in 1998 and end of a number of initiatives 2001. I will look at the transition of Info Centre/Infopool to the Copenhagen Free University; the distance between the self-institutional Info Centre/Infopool (1998-1999) and a new institution which typified the new forms of cultural infrastructure built in the 1990s, through Tate Modern’s inaugural exhibition, Century City, held at the Tate Modern 1 February – 29 April 2001 which made a clumsy attempt to historicise both Infopool and *Inventory*; from the Carnival Against Capital in 18 June 1999 to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 11 September 2001. Or again from the publication of Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, ‘Art Capital’. *Art Monthly*, No.213 (February 1998), <http://infopool.antipool.org/artcap.htm> [Accessed 14 February, 2018] to a revision of this thesis towards a self-critical mode in a text published by the CFU Anthony Davies, ‘The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy’. *Copenhagen Free University*, Copenhagen Free University, (stapled pamphlet), No.3, 29 September 2001, pp.1-20.

6 Cf. Everything Editorial & Jakob Jakobsen, ‘The Info Centre’, *Everything Magazine*, No.3., 1999, pp.48-49 and the discussion of Info Centre in Thoburn, Nicholas. *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016, pp.90-91.

7 ‘The Info Centre’, op. cit., p.48.

8 ‘lateral association’ is a concept I derive from James Holstun’s discussion of print media and the emergence of a ‘revolutionary public sphere’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century is developed first in relation to *Inventory* in Chapter 2, in that chapter I argued for various forms of historical association to precursors, here in this chapter I develop the forms of association between *Inventory* and their contemporaries: ‘during the Revolution, petitions grew larger in scope and ambition, becoming a crucial component of the revolutionary English public sphere, and a medium more of lateral association than of hierarchical appeal.’ James Holstun, *Ehud’s Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution*, London & New York: Verso, 2000, p.107.

the themes and forms developed by *Inventory* and like-minded initiatives briefly combined energies and focus through the Carnival Against Capital held in the City of London on 18 June 1999.<sup>9</sup> A major exhibition, Century City at Tate Modern, provides a counterpoint with which to observe how the efforts to absorb the energies of these ‘self-institutions’ or micro-institutional models into larger institutional frameworks were resisted. I will examine *Inventory*’s relationship to social movements and use the ‘test-site’ established by Info Centre to further qualify *Inventory*’s specific approaches to publishing, making art and putting writing and action into close proximity to develop mutually informative practices of publishing, research, ‘sovereignty’ and autonomy.

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<sup>9</sup> This claim is supported by Jakob Jakobsen writing in 2006: ‘outside the overhyped London art scene of the ’90s a new social and anti-capitalist movement was fermenting [...] In this environment of free market celebration and anti-capitalist mobilisation new modes of self organised institutional experimentation and projects emerged between the art scene and social movements.’ Jakob Jakobsen, ‘Self-Institutionalisation’, *Art Monthly*, No.298, July-August, 2006, pp.7-10, p.7.



Image: Association of Autonomous Astronauts, Space 1999, Info Centre, June 1999

# Info Centre as a Project Space

In 1998 two artists from Copenhagen, Jakob Jakobsen and Henrietta Heise used a small grant from the Danish Contemporary Art Fund (DCAF) to travel to London to establish a small space called Info Centre. The space was simultaneously ‘a project space, a bookshop, an archive, and their home.’<sup>10</sup> Its close precursor in London was Workfortheeyetodo, where *Inventory* made a cabinet display in 1996 and later staged a launch of the journal. Run from a small shopfront in Wapping above the flat where some of its organisers lived – a model for the informal living and working environment Info Centre would later explore – Workfortheeyetodo was a selective bookshop, a ‘book-space’, which featured displays, exhibitions, talks and other ‘activity surrounding the book as a medium.’<sup>11</sup> In 1998 there were few project spaces in London, yet the phenomena of the ‘project’ and ‘project space’ subsequently, quickly, became exalted, overdetermined and moribund in two ways. Firstly, through the theorisation of the project in their pathologisation of neoliberal capitalism, Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski established this temporal cultural form as a harbinger of new attitudes and approaches to labour relations across most sectors of capitalist business and the state.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, as an institutional cliché connoting newness and temporariness to art displays, the project space as a dedicated space for art which was ‘new, young, original, experimental, innovative, initiative, difficult, controversial, speculative, risky’, appears largely as an institutional invention and a means by which hegemonic institutions of art integrate new forms of art and the demands of these new forms for different spaces and modes of display. Many major international art

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10 Brett Bloom, ‘A Magical Land of Roving Santa Claus Armies, Pirated Energy Drinks and a Giant Squatted Urban Village: Political Art Activities in Denmark’, in Josh MacPhee & Erik Reuland (Eds.), *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*, Edinburgh: AK, 2007, pp.130-151, p.148.

11 ‘Workfortheeyetodo was a book-space organised by Simon Cutts, Maggie Smith and Erica Van Horn. It functioned as a bookshop for its selected material, as the prime and most vital means of distribution, and as a reference place for the activity surrounding the book as a medium. At the time this seemed to emanate from the visual arts, but it is closely related to other fields of art, music and literature. As such it provides a resource for use. Integral to this expanding practice, workfortheeyetodo also arranged displays and exhibitions together with readings, to examine and present other collections of material and antecedents, to publicise new books in the field, and to itemise new additions and donations for reference.’ <http://www.thecentreofattention.org/dgwork.html> [Accessed 29/03/2018]

12 Sociologists Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski place a concept of the project, and ‘the city of projects’, centrally to their systematic identification of a new spirit of capitalism which swept the developed world after 1968. Luc Boltanski & Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2005. Though Boltanski and Chiapello fail to acknowledge explicitly the extensive theorisation of the ‘project’ within architectural theory, this aspect and the strong influence of the mode of the architectural both at the root of theories of post-modernism and practices of contemporary art post-1960 must be recognised particularly in terms of *Inventory*’s practice and those gathered in this chapter under the auspices of Info Centre and Infopool. For two relevant architectural theorisations of the project see Massimo Cacciari, *The Unpolitical: on the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, p.122-124 and Vittorio Gregotti, *Inside Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996, p.20.



museums now incorporate a 'project space' in some form.<sup>13</sup> London had been well known for artist-run spaces in the late-'80s and early '90s, these made an oft-noted contribution to the buzz around the so-called yBAs.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1990s these spaces seemed largely institutionalised or instrumentalised by larger commercial galleries committed to moneytising: i.e. translating the buzz around the YBAs into a commercial market for art.<sup>15</sup> Info Centre was vocally anomalous to these developments, which brought privately sponsored or even directed 'project spaces' such as Salon3 and Fig-1 to London at the close of the millennium.<sup>16</sup> *Inventory*, reflecting on their first ten years of activity, appeared scarred by disillusionment with such spaces, referring to 'wars of attrition with institutions, curators and "project spaces" (i.e. cultural entrepreneurs and fashion slaves)',<sup>17</sup> Astroturfed 'independence' and 'alternative' signalling was self-consciously eschewed by Heise and Jakobsen who expressed a desire instead 'to get beyond the dialectical oppositionality and the dependency of being alternative. We wanted to take power and define a situation that didn't mind the mainstream or the establishment or whatever.'<sup>18</sup> Yet between these two formulations we might interpellate contradictory positions: on *Inventory*'s part a reticence which belied their own involvement with such spaces; and on Info Centre's part a 'third way', which initially softened real antagonisms that would only later resurface.

## Fragments of the Future

Peter Osborne has attempted to delineate the 'project space' philosophically – by which the spaces displaying art retain 'their lack of self-evidence' – as a response to the new contingency of art after

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13 The Museum of Modern Art New York established its 'Projects' series in 1971, according to Robert Storr, in acknowledgement of the way 'outside events and aesthetic developments were outpacing the capacity of museums to respond while radically altering the terms on which such a response might be predicated.' Robert Storr, 'A History of Projects', *MoMA Magazine*, Winter/Spring 1996, available:

<https://www.moma.org/pdfs/docs/calendar/projects/HistoryofProjects.pdf> [Accessed 28 June, 2017].

14 Naomi Siderfin, Julian Stallabrass and Duncan Mccorquodale (Eds.), *Occupational Hazard, Critical Writing On Recent British Art*. Black Dog Publishing, 1998.

15 'New modes of sponsorship and collaboration with business were changing the way public institutions worked and were organised, and were changing the values, these institutions reproduced. Parallel to this development many of the so-called alternative galleries of the 90s were losing their critically perspective, if they ever had one, and became stepping stones to the market. 'Self-Institutionalisation', op. cit., p.7.

16 Fig-1 was a year long project funded by the White Cube which instigated 50 projects in 20 weeks over 2000-2001. Salon3 was a project space opened in 1998 based in Elephant & Castle run by three curators: Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, Maria Lind and (supercurator) Hans Ulrich Obrist. I will return to the significance of Salon3's situation at 'strange attractor' Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre later in this and other chapters.

17 *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.6.

18 'A Magical Land of Roving Santa Claus Armies...', op. cit., p.50.

conceptual art movement of the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Osborne locates the cultural significance of the ‘project’ historically in the theorisation of art within the debates of the romantics at Jena.

The project, then, for Schlegel, combines (1) a temporal registration of the necessary incompleteness, and hence striving towards the future, of the reality of the work of art (what we might call its inherently processual character: it is directed towards an end that it has not reached, and cannot reach) with (2) an ideal image of its completion, from which it derives its meaning as the partial realization of something ideal, or a ‘becoming object’ (*eines werdenden Objekts*). Projects are articulated combinations of ideas and processes of actualization.<sup>20</sup>

The project is, in Schlegel’s words, characterised by a feeling for ‘fragments of the future’, and as Osborne describes it, combines an ‘ideal image of [...] completion’ and the experience of something incomplete.<sup>21</sup> This fits the a priori / posteriori scene the Info Centre was able to stage through its reading room, discussions, occasional exhibitions and publications through which it captured a capsule image of activity in London at a particular time which was in process and necessarily fixed into substance something previously inchoate through the projection of an outsiders’ view onto a small scene from afar.<sup>22</sup> Osborne’s synopsis of Schlegel’s fragment also compasses well the homespun and fragmentary relationship to utopian themes Info Centre drew out through their program of self-consciously small and intimate events, exhibitions and publications i.e. ‘striving towards the future’ and ‘directed towards an end that it has not reached and cannot reach’.<sup>23</sup>

Our collaborations are not about joint artistic projects, but about opening fields where already existing ideas and activities may accelerate, splinter, condense, etc. Our focus on ‘Art, Architecture, Technology and Urban Life’ is perhaps mainly to make it clear that we are not concentrating exclusively on art, but are interested in several areas of a larger cultural field.<sup>24</sup>

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19 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London ; New York: Verso Books, 2013, p.168.

20 Ibid., p.169.

21 Friedrich Schlegel, “‘Athenaums” - Fragmente’, No.22, p.78; ‘Athenaeum Fragments’, No.22, pp. 20-21, (translation amended) quoted in Ibid., p.169.

22 Apropos of a statement by Adam Scrivener on Info Centre’s success in uniting formerly warring or indifferent factions of London’s small publishing scene. Conversation with the author, c.2014.

23 *Anywhere or Not at All*, op. cit., p.168.

24 Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, ‘Info’, presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

One aspect elided in Osborne's analysis is the emphasis of latter-day projects such as IC and *Inventory* upon materials and conditions readily to hand. While these projects clearly echo the way the romantic conception, on Schlegel and others' terms, emphasised the abilities of the totalising work of art to integrate the full spectrum of human knowledge: science, art, music, biology, nature, in post-conceptual, late-20th century practices, this logic was extended to materials and material practices and aspects of everyday life or popular culture and affirmed as an ethical good. Info Centre therefore drew on many practices proximate but not identical to the field of art, evidenced in their first exhibition combining architecture, urbanism and art. Jakobsen and Heise claimed it was unimportant whether these activities were 'labelled' art or not.

art is sometimes a free space where ideas can be tested. Art is a tool one can deploy to reach other objectives (knowledge, pleasure, etc.). In practice, we insist that art may have a symbolic significance which may invade consciousness (calmly and quietly) and liberate energy. The so-called non-artists we are working with do precisely that. The fact that they prefer not to be labelled as artists is beside the point.<sup>25</sup>

This formulation of art as 'a free space' or art as 'a tool' as well as the consequences of the reframing of sites of expertise associated with 'non-art' and 'non-artists' within the framework of art should, I think, be critically evaluated. First, however, we need to develop the qualities and activities Info Centre embodied on their own terms and define what *Inventory's* specific contribution in this context was. The convivial yet matter of fact presentation of materials in the Info Centre space, as well as publicity and invitations to events, tended to de-emphasise the materials' aesthetic qualities in favour of the potential for knowledge, pleasure and sociality which might be encountered there. However, this could be understood to constitute an 'aesthetic' in itself.<sup>26</sup> Invites emphasised simplicity, paucity of information and joviality, flat statements such as 'We have brewed beer. Have a drink' and 'See you in space' are inscribed on one invite from 24 June 1999.<sup>27</sup> The seriality of these invitation cards and the two colour printed irregular *Infotainment* newsletter/journal established a minimal, reiterative, institutional identity. This attitude of playful

25 Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, 'Info', presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

26 This breaks with my established use of the term to seemingly indulge a shallow or colloquial use of the term 'aesthetic', by which I mean to connote a look or style rather than an account of aesthetic experience developed by philosophical traditions deriving from Immanuel Kant. Nonetheless there a meeting point can be established between the conditions for the aestheticisation of everyday materials, the socialisation of this as a form of aesthetic experience and the aforementioned account of aesthetic experience. Visitors to Info Centre did not think they were visiting a domestic or office space, but rather an estranged and hybrid version of both, whilst Heise and Jakobsen may have insisted on the practicality of the materials arranged there, in other contexts the choices of arrangement was argued in conceptual or aesthetic terms which emphasised the self-reflexivity and self-consciousness associated with art and aesthetic experience.

27 Invitation Card for AAA, *Space 1999*, Info Centre, Hackney, 24 June 1999.

construction towards the production of an ephemeral institution informed a critical discussion around the concept of 'self-institution' developed by Jakobsen and Heise in dialogue with others at Info Centre, to which we will return shortly.<sup>28</sup> The apparent serious intent of the space itself 'Info Centre' – being more suggestive of the activities of business or state – and of its areas of interest: 'Art, Architecture, Technology and Urban Life', was offset by the informal tone of the invitations. Such juxtapositions tended to emphasise the lack of remove of Info Centre from 'ordinary' or 'everyday' life.

Info Centre is, insofar as possible an open environment, and we are used to our ideas being infected, that our home-brew is contaminated, that people come in from the street that we would not have expected to come, etc. Still, IC is not a democratic institution, although we promote exchange and dialogue. We are subjective and become subjective through our practice. That is why we collaborate with people whose practice we know and whom we have been following for some time. And we collaborate because we want to know something, discuss shared references and open up new possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

As a 'focus of activities' and meeting point for 'development of knowledge on the border between aesthetics, politics and everyday life' Jakobsen and Heise were also keen to emphasise that Info Centre is also where they sleep. In various statements they emphasised the 'contamination' of any attempt to separate either their collective practice from their domestic life, or social practice as individuals, or art from the surrounding world.<sup>30</sup> This is complementary to the view put forward by *Inventory*, in a questionnaire posed to several artists and groups involved in self-publishing. To the question if 'art does survive the next four months – what does its survival mean to you?', they reply: 'Nothing [...] human ingenuity and expressiveness will always persist – it is only the form that changes – [...] some form of new media will replace the fine art forms [...] A form only

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28 Info Centre was tabled to run for one year, it extended its life span for a further six months.

29 Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, 'Info', presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

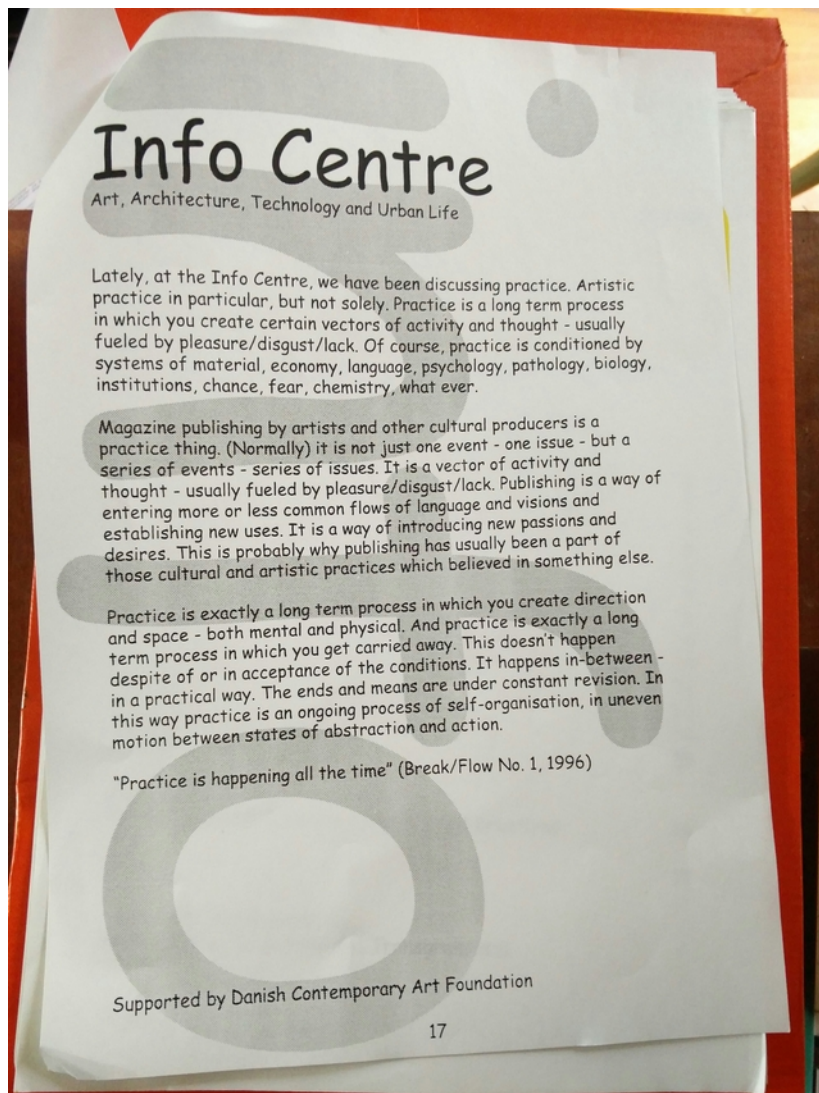
30 The experience of visiting Info Centre in the late-1990s was, for me, personally and professionally intriguing. At this time I had returned to East London after university and began exploring the explosion of new art spaces around the inner peripheries of central London. Commonly these were to be found in Hackney, Shoreditch, Mile End and Bow, Walworth, Vauxhall and Brixton, areas often with densely packed social and public housing estates, recent histories of squatting and illegal occupation, markets, ex-industrial units where strong bohemian, subcultural, racialised and working class communities shared space. The atmosphere of visiting art or cultural spaces in such areas was entirely different from a trip into town to experience work in either commercial or institutional spaces. Often there was a strong experience of informality at the former spaces, nonetheless, generally the focus on the artworks was central. However, at Info Centre I remember the feeling that attempting to focus on and experience disinterestedly the 'artwork' was made deliberately difficult, partially by the congenial greeting of Heise and Jakobsen as hosts, secondly by the display of the work itself, which seemed to consist mostly of documents, or office-like presentation of information, or the general suggestion that these displays were mere supports for events and forms of social engagement which happened in the space or outside of it at other times i.e. in a time-frame well extended beyond the allocated opening times for visitors.

survives if human beings wish to use it and if there is an audience, an economy to support it.[...] these attempts to cross the divides that individuate us as beings [...] are meaningful, inevitable, and important’<sup>31</sup> In *Inventory*’s account, art is tied to use, but invention and expression are considered by to be invariants across history, while art itself is historical. We might challenge this, and attempt to show that human needs themselves are also historical, in fact *Inventory* journal might be *used* to support just such a perspective. This I will attempt to develop, however, worth acknowledging here is the antagonism expressed by *Inventory* with regards to the framing of their work as an art practice, but also the complementarity between *Inventory*’s view of the source of art (human expression and invention) and its importance in a dialectical movement between individuation and collectivity with Info Centre’s stated indifference to art and emphasis on both individuation and collaboration: ‘We are subjective and become subjective through our practice. That is why we collaborate with people’.<sup>32</sup>

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31 ‘A form only survives if human beings wish to use it and if there is an audience, an economy to support it. So whether art (as we currently know it) exists or not has absolutely no consequence. It is only this expressiveness, these perpetual attempts at some form of communication, these attempts to cross the divides that individuate us as beings, which are meaningful, inevitable, and important. A given culture’s aptitude for adaptation means more than the designation of a word.’ ‘Inventory Questionnaire’ in *Indent*, op. cit., p.34.

32 ‘Info’, op. cit.



Images: (above) Invitation Card for AAA, *Space 1999*, Info Centre, Hackney, June 1999, collection of the author (left)  
*Infotainment*, No.2, 1998.

## ‘Exhibitions’ at Info Centre

The first ‘exhibition’ at Info Centre was a group exhibition (8 May 1998–20 June 1998) involving the London Psychogeographical Association, Birgitte Louis Hansen (architect) & Joep van Lieshout (artist), Jakob Jakobsen and Henriette Heise (artists/curators/writers). The exhibition blended displays of printed matter, artworks, home beer brewing equipment and plans for a utopian/dystopian Free State Almere. Subsequent events and exhibitions included the exhibition of a series of *Survival Scrapbooks*, published in the 1970s by artist, musician and film-maker Stefan Scszelkun.<sup>33</sup> Another exhibition, ‘The Five Year Plan: Propaganda and Printed Matter from the Association of Autonomous Astronauts’ June 1999 marked the culmination of the AAA’s five years of distributed international activity after launching its ‘independent, community-based space exploration programme’ in 1995.<sup>34</sup> *Inventory* took part in the exhibition ‘Wall Newspapers’, for which they designed a bespoke poster, these were plastered on the walls of Info Centre, distributed as an insert in *Infotainment* No.2, 1998, and affixed to walls in the streets surrounding the Centre. The Info Centre was, Jakobsen insisted, ‘more like a reading room than an actual gallery’.<sup>35</sup> Whilst the exhibitions opened and closed a reading room formed a ‘central part’ existed throughout ‘to present and accumulate material in the process.’<sup>36</sup> This ongoing component, developing over time, drew a thread of continuity between exhibitions and events, archiving traces of the passing events, and beyond the space to publications as the trace of activities located elsewhere. This was, I wish to argue, *a*, if not *the*, key presentational context for *Inventory* journal, where its ability to catalyse ‘changes [to] the condition or perception of existence [...] for one reader’, positioned somewhere between distraction and activation, within a context where the outcomes were social rather than narrowly institutional.<sup>37</sup>

Through the flyposting of the posters exhibited around the local area the reading room took to the streets. In this sense Info Centre was, in Jakobsen and Heise’s words, ‘an open institution pointing beyond itself’.<sup>38</sup> Complementing the events and exhibitions was a regular newsletter, *Infotainment*,

33 The *Scrapbooks* were ‘handbooks for ‘autonomous living from a practical perspective’ arranged around themes of ‘shelter’, ‘food’, ‘access to tools’, ‘play’, ‘paper houses’ and ‘energy’. Simon Yuill, ‘Survival Scrapbooks’, *Mute*, 25 March, 2006, available, <http://www.lipparosa.org/essays/survivalscrapbooks.pdf> [Accessed 28 June, 2017].

34 The launch took place, at Windsor Castle on 23 April 1995, Association of Autonomous Astronauts, ‘Declarations and Exit Strategies’, *Infotainment*, London: Info Centre, No.6, 1999, p.2.

35 ‘Info’, op. cit.

36 Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, ‘Info Centre’, in *Infotainment*, No.1, 1998.

37 ‘The existence of the journal, if it changes the condition or perception of existence on this mudball for one reader, then the journal has carried out its task.’ ‘Inventory Questionnaire’, *Indent*, op. cit., p.34.

38 I.E. its exhibitions often consisted of documentation of activities which took place outside of its walls. Jakob



which often carried texts about or with a direct bearing on the exhibitions. Later an occasional pamphlet series, *Infopool* and the website [Infopool.org.uk](http://Infopool.org.uk) extended the interests of the project beyond its short occupation (1998-1999) of the Mare Street space. An extension, conceptually and geographically, outwards from the wall newspaper show at Info Centre was *Inventory's* project *Smash This Puny Existence* which took place in London's Hanway Street 20 March 1999 in proximity to Expo-Destructo – a 'post-media' flea market which brought together contributors to Info Centre, such as *Inventory* and *Break/Flow*, with other international groups, associated with the online mailing list Nettime, using independent media.<sup>39</sup> From Info Centre developed new and differing combinations of materials and bodies, individuals and groups. These are developments I will track by following debates circulating around Info Centre and through understanding Info Centre as a site of development for *Inventory*.

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Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, 'Info', presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

39 Archived web pages for Expo-Destructo: a Post-media Flea Market can be found at <http://bak.spc.org/iod/destructo/> and <http://bak.spc.org/iod/destructo/flea-market.html> [Accessed 28 June, 2017].



Image: Info Centre, London with copies of *Inventory*, c.1998

## Moving Across Classification and Categories

we do not really work from any set hypothesis, but move across and mix categories. It is therefore not the investigation which is central to the connection with processes and becomings, but the transformative practice.<sup>40</sup>

Info Centre provided a specific space – imagined as a ‘centre’ – through which to *spatialise* and *concretise* concerns with ‘moving across and mix[ing] categories’, concerns close to those expressed in *Inventory* journal. As such Info Centre aggregated and developed a core concern of *Inventory*’s, of ‘playing with category and convention’<sup>41</sup> and the ‘transformative’ aspects of classification stressed their own editorial work.<sup>42</sup>

Over a short time Info Centre became supplemented by a website, Infopool, which archived ‘research’, texts that grew out of events, exhibitions, meetings and collaborations with contributors to Info Centre. After 1999, when Jakobsen and Heise returned to Copenhagen they continued these collaborations and developed the hybrid mode of combining domestic space with research-based art and theory that they had experimented with at Info Centre by founding the Copenhagen Free University (CFU).<sup>43</sup> Shifting from the self-institutional informal space of IC to the grander claims of CFU Heise and Jakobsen began to frame both projects in terms of ‘knowledge production’ and to pose questions about who might be an intellectual and what might constitute ‘knowledge’ in the framework of rapid global restructuring of education systems into an integrated ‘knowledge economy’.<sup>44</sup> *Inventory* were evidently one of the practices which contributed to this confident orientation towards ‘research’.<sup>45</sup> In the transition from Info Centre / Infopool to CFU, the group began to deploy idiosyncratic glossaries on posters and used dictionaries, glossaries and taxonomic formats as organisationing forms with which to collaborate with others and arrange heterogeneous

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40 Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, ‘Info’, presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

41 *Inventory*, ‘For a Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995.

42 ‘Orpheus Street’, op. cit., p.7. *Inventory*’s critical taxonomy, formed by its glossary section, initially discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to Bataille’s work with journals and groups, is discussed further, in terms of the novel approaches of writing generated, in Chapter 5 on the Journal and Form and in Appendices: Glossary Exposé.

43 Based at their flat on Læssøesgade in Copenhagen

44 ‘Copenhagen Free University was established to explore and intensify the forms of knowledge and subjectivity that we see withdrawing from or being excluded from the increasingly narrow-minded circulation of the knowledge economy.’ <http://infopool.antipool.org/cfu.htm> [Accessed 21 November 2018]

45 Indeed a version of *Inventory*’s text ‘fierce sociology’, originally published in *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, appeared on the Infopool site now archived at <http://infopool.antipool.org/inventor.htm> [Accessed 26 November, 2018]

materials, essays, art projects, sound recordings, research projects on their website Infopool. The technique of creating idiosyncratic or satirical glossaries, both online and in print, was common across groups operating at this time, even with divergent interests and politics.<sup>46</sup> It is a tactic which allows for the horizontal and associative navigation of terms and their transformation. drawing directly from *Inventory*'s Glossary section the tactic also looks back towards the work of surrealists and before them Ambrose Bierce's satirical *Devil's Dictionary* and the foundational document of the enlightenment, Diderot and Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, but also forward to the vast online collaborative sites: Nupedia, Wikipedia and Uncyclopedia developing during the 1990 and 2000s.<sup>47</sup> The meeting point between the different initiatives at Info Centre can be understood as a concrete socialisation parallel to the wider online convergence around the new possibilities for the circulation of knowledge in the information age. The continuity between these formats of knowledge production and presentation, or systematisation, of knowledge across a long duration of time was, as reprised at this moment, deliberately suggestive of tensions in modernity between systematic and chaotic orders of knowledge and between mimetic and logical approaches to the generation of new thought.<sup>48</sup> The strategic and practical formation of Info Centre/Infopool as a hybrid institutional-domestic-social space can be seen as an attempt to live and develop the formlessness initiated by Bataille's entropic critique of categories in his pre-war writings for *Documents*. Rather than a mere exercise, this practical critique of rigid classification moved on from the critique of literary-philosophical form to inform political form. In Bataille's practice this was to take critical shape as an 'organic movement' through the shifting development and associations between individuals and groups experienced in *Documents*, *Contre-Attaque*, *Acéphale* and the College of Sociology.<sup>49</sup> At Info Centre we can see that both aspects of the critique of classification met again in practice as discussions of cultural and political organisational form were developed adjacent to and even internally within explorations of the glossary/dictionary as form.

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46 E.g. Copenhagen Free University, Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, London Psychogeographical Association, *Inventory*, *Turbulent Times*.

47 With Wikipedia launching in 2001, Info Centre and *Inventory* here can be understood to have been substantially ahead of the curve. Anon., *Principles and Patterns of Social Knowledge Applications*, <http://ska.quicquid.org/#Wikipedia%7CWikipedia%20%3D%20Wiki%20%2B%20Encyclopedia> [Accessed 26 November, 2018]

48 See Saul Albert, Simon Worthington, and Fabian Thompsett, with help from Ben Russell, Jo Walsh and Asim, 'Freemasons Of The Future', *Mute*, Vol 1, No. 27, Winter/Spring 2004, available, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/freemasons-future> [Accessed 26 November, 2018]

49 'Counter-attack: Union of the Struggle of Revolutionary Intellectuals' in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, (Eds.), *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, (Trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski), London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2001, pp.114-117, p.115.

# SLEEP

The Free University is an artist run institution dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language. We do not accept the so-called new knowledge economy as the framing understanding of knowledge. We work with forms of knowledge that are fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising subjective, uneconomic, acapitalist, produced in the kitchen, produced when asleep or arisen on a social excursion – collectively.

# RESEARCH

We are both sitting at the table, with our hands under our legs, waiting for the food to arrive. I am not sure if I should speak, anyway she starts talking and pointing at things on the shelf, but I don't know if it is an expression, or a word. I try to copy what it is she is saying, but it is hard to keep

Image: 'Sleep' and 'Research' entries from the 'ABC of Copenhagen Free University', poster, c.2001



**A**  
Association of Autonomous Astronauts, Apple Computers, A.I.N., Academy 23, AKCT, Autotoxicity, Ambush

**B**  
BM Box 3641, London WC1N 3XX, England UK

**C**  
Chaos, Aleister Crowley, Cults & Culture, Fred Carter, Coldcut, corrupt disks, Copyright, charts, Cold Spring

**D**  
Decadent Action, Distro, Thee Database, Dead by Dawn, Dragon, Dust Devil, Disciples of Belial,

**E**  
Eden, "Everybody is a Star", erratic publishing schedule, Endura, Expansions

**F**  
Finsbury Park, free photocopying, Filemaker Pro, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Fallout

**G**  
Grievous Angel, Gyrus T, godhaven, golem, Green Lanes N4, Kitty Genovese, Growl graphic

**H**  
Phil Hine, Head Magazine, Hip Hop, The Hidden Persuaders, Headbutt, Hackney Anarchy Week, Hard Knox

**I**  
Thee Instagon Foundation, Invisible Colleges, "I didn't do nuthin'" exhibition, industrial music for industrial people

**J**  
Junk Mail Backlash, Justify My Hate

**K**  
Kali, knitting, King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown, keeping it surreal

**L**  
London Psychogeographical Association, Lorna, Luther Blissett Project, Lists, Leighton Buzzard, Little Red Riding Hood

**M**  
Terence McKenna, Magico-Marxism, Mind Invaders, Mother Destruction, Manchester Area Psychogeographic, Mitch, Mexica-aztecs, Merzbow

**N**  
Neoist Alliance, New Lettrist International Congress, Nightmare Sleepwalk Remix, Nocturnal Emissions, Not Breathing, NASA/TREK, networking

**O**  
Occulture, Out of Order Order, OKOK Society, Ov Magazine, orange balloon assault, off-set litho

**P**  
Psychogeography, Lee "Scratch" Perry, pritt-stick, Praxis, public transport, Prague, Physics, plagiarism, pink walls, P.U.R.E. Thoughts

**Q**  
Quantum Psychology, Quark Xpress, Questionnaires

**R**  
Runes, Runciter Corporation cartoons, reviews, Ratio3 series, Rapid Eye, Raido, Rubber Stamps, Recipe for Designer Religion, red eyes and R.S.I.

**S**  
Satan is Dead, Stoke Newington, Sheets Project, scarification, south London drum 'n' noise scene, Smile, Space 1999, Sabon, Skint, Smoke Demon, sigils, Skycutter, The Sekhmet Hypothesis, Sesame Street toys

**T**  
Temple ov Psychick Youth, Towards 2012, taoism, 23<sup>rd</sup> Current, techno and meditation, Talking Stick, Thought Crime, tai chi, technology works/technology delivers?

**U**  
Urban Takeover, Underground, up for the downstroke, U.N.I.T.

**V**  
Viral TX, Vienna, variables, Vision Temple

**W**  
[www.uncarved.demon.co.uk](http://www.uncarved.demon.co.uk)

**X**  
XXX-Tripping, xtians

**Y**  
Youth culture mashed up with ideology

**Z**  
Zombification, zen, zines, Z'ev

## Turbulent Times Alphabet of desire

Image: *Turbulent Times*, 'Alphabet of Desire', in *Infotainment*, No.2, 1998



Image: Copenhagen Free University, Factory of Escape, 2002–2003. Installation view, Copenhagen Free University.



Recalling Caillois method of ‘diagonal science’ or ‘diagonal classification’ discussed in Chapter 3, Jakobsen and Heise stressed that to ‘move across and mix categories’ was a strategy which could not simply shuffle the deck, but must become determinate through ‘transformative practice’.<sup>50</sup> In ‘Orpheus Street’, concurring, *Inventory* assert that ‘the modus operandi of collecting and classifying, of taxonomy, is in effect a transformative one.’<sup>51</sup> *Inventory*’s editors write that

the map of existing orders and groupings is more fantastic, more worthy of investigation than any orders of the ‘merely’ imagined. It is only through such mapping that a transformative imagination may be formed, that something ‘not forgotten’ can be grasped.<sup>52</sup>

What ‘the map’ is, of course is initially unclear, but if we consider the actual maps *Inventory* included in their initial displays and in the journal’s pages, these include ordnance survey maps, transport maps, estate maps, photographs, indexes, classified adverts, maps from fantasy novels and games among many other items. I believe for *Inventory* all of these things are to be considered ‘maps’. It is for *Inventory* particularly the banal or functional ‘map’ that can, once removed from its functional frame of reference, be understood to be ‘fantastic’. Rather than countering the force of existing taxonomies with pure imagination, *Inventory* instead propose applying ‘transformative imagination’ to these existing systems. This is a process that opens the seemingly logical operating mode of classification to the unconscious since for any classificatory system what is outside of it is a threat to be absorbed and integrated, but what is presently outside its system is by its nature not yet constitutive of its consciousness. The commitment to ‘forgetting’ memorialised on the front cover of each journal issue is here tempered by the prospect of the recovery of something ‘not forgotten’, remembered or present but unconscious.<sup>53</sup> It is suggestive of a form of knowledge which lies outside of the empirical but in dialogue with it and I would like here to propose that what *Inventory* are proposing is a form of mimetic knowledge which implies not the stable state of subject and object, but a transformative process which rearranges both.<sup>54</sup> To textually

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50 Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, ‘Info’, presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

51 *Inventory*, ‘Orpheus Street’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, p.6.

52 ‘Orpheus Street’, op. cit., pp.6–7.

53 ‘One cannot help but live expressively; to record, remember, forget; to lose, find, and collect.’ ‘Do You Feel Crushed?’, op. cit., p.7.

54 A form of speculative knowledge and learning, which can be meaningfully related to Walter Benjamin’s ‘speculative’ critique of Immanuel Kant discussed in Chapter 3, and Adorno and Benjamin’s theory of mimesis is proposed by the Italian materialist philosopher Giambattista Vico, ‘Man becomes all things not by understanding (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*)... for when he does not understand, he makes them out of himself, and by transforming

appropriate the scientism of taxonomy is to claim an authority over the structuring framework of disciplines. To do so playfully and to submit this to group process, revision and iteration, is to make this work open to displacement, improvement or ridicule. For *Inventory*, by publishing a glossary in each issue and inviting outside contributors the glossary itself became the site of (self)-invention. This was, for *Inventory*, a form of ‘sovereignty’ on the terrain of knowledge – self-direction – self-determination of linguistic terms.<sup>55</sup> Here, between the ‘ideal’ edifice of the completed glossary/encyclopedia and its necessary incompleteness, ‘inexhaustible’ and ‘processual’ quality the project of the glossary meets the romantic conception of the artwork.<sup>56</sup> For Info Centre / Infopool / CFU, generating glossary entries collectively with others contributed to ‘a communal construction of knowledge through the social relations rather than specific individuals imparting a pre-formed knowledge.’<sup>57</sup>

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himself, becomes them.’ E. Gianturco, ‘Translators introduction’ in Giambattista Vico, *On the Study Methods of Our Times*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990, p.xxxi.

55 ‘*Inventory* would oppose any object as meaningful in isolation and would mistrust any serial arrangement or permanent fixing of things which enslaves humankind’s communication through material culture; consigning him/her to thinghood. Only the play of interpretation upon interpretation affirms the sovereign destructive character of life in which relationships, meanings, stories are played out, lived through, annulled, and discarded in the object world.’ *Inventory* ‘Inventory: Cool, Calm And ...’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997, pp.4-7, p.4.

56 See Peter Osborne’s interpretation of Friedrich Schlegel, “‘Athenaums” -Fragmente’, No.22, p.78; ‘Athenaeum Fragments’, No. 22, pp. 20-21, (translation amended) quoted in *Anywhere or Not at All*, op. cit., p.169.

57 Jakob Jakobsen, Josephine Berry Slater, Henriette Heise, Howard Slater, ‘You Forgot to Put Your Hair On’, *Variant*, No.15, Summer, 2002, available, <http://www.variant.org.uk/15texts/CFU.html> [Accessed 5 July, 2017]



Image: British Council Window Gallery, Prague, 1996

Another, politicising, vector through this process is subjectivity. Heise and Jakobsen spoke of Info Centre as a 'subjectivising process'<sup>58</sup>, the process of overcoming norms and finding others through collaboration.<sup>59</sup> This conceptualisation of art/non-art activity as a process of subject formation contributes a supplement to the Romantic concept of art over which Immanuel Kant's universal subject of judgement had hitherto retained predominance.<sup>60</sup> The problem of the subject, or what a subject is, and its relation to classification/reclassification surfaces in *Inventory*'s methodological statements on 'fierce sociology': but also in 'Post-media Operators' by Howard Slater, a text which acted as a binding theoretical innovation for many of the practices collected at Info Centre, where he offers that post-media is a 'meta-categorical social practice of cultural creation'.<sup>61</sup> This text will be understood as developing and disseminating new concepts originated through debates between contributors catalysed by Info Centre and in turn, for *Inventory* a new way of perceiving their own initiatives.

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58 Cf. Gary Genosko, (Ed.), *Deleuze and Guattari*. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers. London & New York: Routledge, 2001, p.1315.

59 'it is liberating for us to work across social/cultural categories and pursue cross-sectional lines of flight, since we can thereby shortcut the ready-made "subjects" that await us in all areas of culture, as for instance the role of the artist.' Jakob Jakobsen & Henriette Heise, 'Info', presented as part of the exhibition at Melbourne Biennial, 1999, n.p.

60 Though Kant's position could be understood to have been challenged earlier by e.g. Friedrich Schiller, or subsequently through critiques of Kantian aesthetics such as those developed by Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno and explored in Chapter 3. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London; New York: Verso, 1998 and Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor). London; New York: Continuum Press, 1997.

61 Howard Slater/Eddie Miller/Flint Michigan, 'Post-media Operators', *Datacide*, No.2, 1997, available, <https://datacide-magazine.com/post-media-operators/> [Accessed, 7 July, 2017].





Image: Info Centre, Hackney, 1998

# Post-Media

The concept of post-media was first developed by Félix Guattari in the 1980s to identify a 'post-mass media' moment on the basis of the following four indicators:

- i) foreseeable technological developments;
- ii) the necessary redefinition of the relations between producers and consumers;
- iii) the institution of new social practices and their interference with the development of media;
- iv) the development of information technologies.<sup>62</sup>

Slater's 'Post-media Operators' picks up a number of these factors, but also substantially develops the concept in terms which further specify the relation of culture to post-Fordist social conditions.<sup>63</sup> The text 'Post-media Operators' was published in a number of versions and formats. In the canonical version of text, upon which I will concentrate here, Slater firstly establishes theorising as not after 'the creative event', problematising the norm that 'theorising is normally attributed to those known variously as critics, reviewers and essayists'.<sup>64</sup> Instead, according to Slater, 'theorising goes on at the same time as the creative event is being worked upon. It is complementary to the event and, more importantly, it is the continuous precondition for the event.'<sup>65</sup> Extending this model of 'auto-theoretical' labour to a wide range of cultural practices, Slater suggests that 'post-media becomes a practice that knows no bounds or discipline.'<sup>66</sup> Yet, we might question this model, which borrows a sense of indetermination from aesthetic theory in order to generalise it to other practices, what Slater then calls 'practice of freedom'. Since, the carpenter approaches the job of fitting a

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62 Félix Guattari, *A Guattari Reader*, Gary Genosko (Ed.), Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, FN#98, p.34.

63 Matthew Fuller, Howard Slater and editors of *Everything Magazine*, 'Everything Editorial', *Everything Magazine*, No.3.2, 2000, pp.36-38, p.38.

64 'Post-Media Operators: Sovereign and Vague', op. cit., p.16.

65 In all tasks, practical or artistic, theorising takes place, Slater's example is a carpenter fitting a cupboard: 'there is this ongoing process about the nature of the material, a questioning of the next step, and how it is best to overcome those obstacles, such as the unevenness of the wall, that present themselves.' 'Post-Media Operators: Sovereign and Vague', op. cit., p.16.

66 'It is a web-site, a zine, a limited-run-record-label, a pirate station, a flyer, a poster, a video circulated through the post, the telling of stories and news around a pub table, a distribution network of unseen nodes, ephemeral organisations, a promulgation of fiction.' 'Post-media Operators', *Datacide*, No.2, 1997, op. cit.

cupboard with a fixed idea of what a cupboard is, this remains stable from beginning to completion, where the process behind ‘creative events’ might revise the original idea several times.

In brief these are products that are critical of consensus and which draw attention to the determining ‘invisible structures’: the selection and editing techniques that act to overcode and delimit the powers of reception; they are, to a certain degree, free of being overencumbered by prior interpretation and in this way can function as sites for a ‘practice of freedom’: a freedom of thought, a freedom of language and a freedom of sound. Practices that could not be pursued through the media or the academy.<sup>67</sup>

For Guattari, the advent of the new technologies of cable TV and Minitel allowed for new assemblages of media and media users).<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the ‘post-media era’ provides new opportunities for the combination of media and the reconfiguration of the passive consumer to become a producer in this new ‘chain of expression’ or by associating with the products of others to participate in a ‘collective assemblage of enunciation’.<sup>69</sup> We can discern a relay or convergence between Slater’s reprisal of Guattari’s concept and *Inventory*’s theorisation of method in the 1997 text ‘Fierce Sociology’, where they write, quoting related writings by Guattari, ‘[i]n an affirmative manner, [...] we see sociality as a continuous movement, a continuous “fabrication of new assemblages of annunciation, individual and collective”’<sup>70</sup> Slater lays his emphasis not on the development of a counter-periodisation to postmodernism, which seemed to be Guattari’s initial concern, instead he plots a movement ‘[f]rom post media era to post media operators to put the emphasis on the listener / reader as operator, reconfiguring, reclassifying, reencapsulating.’<sup>71</sup>

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67 Howard Slater, ‘Post-Media Operators: Sovereign and Vague’, *Datacide*, No.7, pp.16-19, p.19, available, <https://datacide-magazine.com/post-media-operators-%E2%80%9Csovereign-vague%E2%80%9D/> [Accessed 5 July, 2017].

68 Minitel was a French State-run intranet operated via terminals connected by phonelines. Gary Genosko, ‘The Promise of Post-Media’, in *Provocative Alloys*, Clemens Apprich, Josephine Berry, Anthony Iles and Oliver Lerone Schulz (Eds.) *Provocative Alloys*, London & Lüneburg: Post-Media Lab and Mute Books, 2013, pp.15-25. Guattari’s primary discussions of the concept of post-media are ‘La révolution moléculaire’, *Le Monde*, 7 December 1990; ‘Pour une éthique des médias’, *Le Monde* 6 November 1991, Translated as ‘Toward an Ethics of the Media’, (trans.) Janell Watson, *Polygraph* 14, 2002, pp.17-22; ‘Ecologie et politique: Un nouvel axe progressiste’, *Le Monde* 4 June 1992; and ‘Vers une ère post-média’, *Chimères* 28 (printemps-été 1992). [http://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal\\_chimeres/files/termin51.pdf](http://www.revue-chimeres.fr/drupal_chimeres/files/termin51.pdf) translated as ‘Towards a Post-Media Era’, (Trans.) Alya Sebti and Clemens Apprich, in Clemens Apprich, Josephine Berry, Anthony Iles and Oliver Lerone Schulz (Eds.) *Provocative Alloys*, London & Lüneburg: Post-Media Lab and Mute Books, 2013, pp.26.

69 The ‘*chaînon expressif*’ or ‘expressive chain’ is the term Guattari uses in one of the key texts defining post-media. Félix Guattari, ‘Towards a Post-Media Era’, (Trans.) Alya Sebti and Clemens Apprich, in *Provocative Alloys*, op. cit.

70 *Inventory*, ‘Fierce Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8, p.6, Quoting Félix Guattari, ‘Regimes, Pathways, Subjects’ in *Incorporations*, Eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, New York: Zone, 1995, pp.21–36.

71 Howard Slater, ‘Unparaphraseable Life Notes on Third Cinema’, unpublished draft, 2017. ‘the post-media operators, not being aligned to the strictures of categorisation nor to the traps of visibility, would enter into the same relation to the avant-garde as it does the media: one of “exterior vicinity”.’ Howard Slater, ‘Post-Media Operators: Sovereign and Vague’, *Datacide*, No.7, 2000, pp.16-19, p.19, available, <http://datacide.c8.com/post-media-operators->

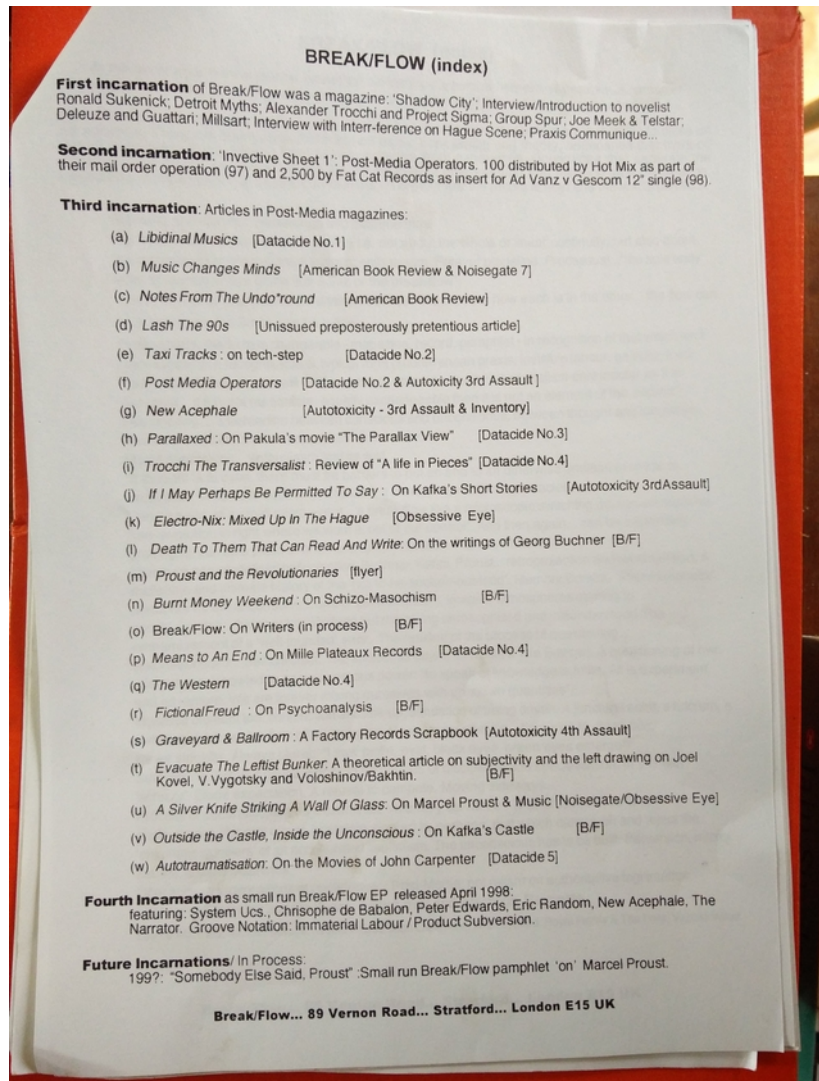


The canalisation of ‘theory’ towards a specific activity, and a specific role within a division of labour tends to reinforce a hierarchy of theory above activity.<sup>72</sup> For Slater then, there is always an ‘auto-theoretical’ element to all activity, and this moves us closer to understand *Inventory* as a format where theory and experiments become counterparts. Decision-making as we saw at Info Centre could be applied as much to the reproductive or distributive aspects of the work, as to its production. In fact, publishing here blurs that line, between production of an object and reproduction of it, since it is a display of sorts print is reconfigurable especially in a digital paradigm – as stated earlier, print can contain other media – thus its post-media – as in multi-but also media-critical – potential became realised during the period and in the space under discussion.

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[%e2%80%9csovereign-vague%e2%80%9d/](#) [Accessed 7 July, 2017].

<sup>72</sup> ‘(a compartmentalisation of tasks that undoubtedly limits perception), serves to reinforce the divide between consciousness and activity, between thought and action; it severs the creative producer from the consciousness of his or her activity to the point that the theoretical component is occluded.’ Ibid., p.16.



Images: (above left) *Break/Flow* at Info Centre, (below left) *Infopool* pamphlets, 2000 (right) 'Break/Flow (index)', *Infotainment*, London: Info Centre, No.2, 1998, pp.11-12.

## A Rough Conceptualism: Printed Matter and Other Media

For the groups assembled at Info Centre print or publishing, loosely conceived, formed a common field of reference around which other media were arrayed. Two key examples are Howard Slater's own *Break/Flow* magazine and the AAA's exhibition. An unnumbered ('fourth incarnation') of Slater's zine *Break/Flow* took the form of a vinyl EP with tracks by five contributors, displayed in the reading room of Info Centre in the reading room area the printed issues could be perused whilst one listened to the EP on a listening station. Here, as theorised in Slater's music criticism, the 'listener is operator' priming the machinery of musical reproduction, choosing tracks, repeating, or fast forwarding through them whilst shuffling through printed matter. Through this small media assemblage a series of self-reflexive loops are generated which draw attention to the particularity of each mediatic event whilst drawing them into a rich field of association which is as much configuring as configured.

*Break/Flow* a magazine self-published by Slater can be conceived of as his authorial organ, but it also might be thought of as a kind of vehicle of navigation. Two A4 sheets inserted in *Infotainment* No.2 arrange the instances of *Break/Flow* not as single magazine issues, but as a number of outings listed as five 'incarnations'.<sup>73</sup> The use of an index by *Break/Flow*, given Slater's interests in de- and re-classifying and in conceptual art, suggests a proximity to *Inventory*'s project, with its index or table of contents displayed, almost factographically, emphatically on the front page of each issue.<sup>74</sup> These appropriations of an 'aesthetics of administration' make an adaptation or borrowing of capitalist technology – considered in the broadest sense to include both capitalist administrative techniques and capitalist machines – in order to open up this logic to motives other than production for capitalist value. The *Break/Flow* index nevertheless provide basic information and a navigation

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73 These include a 'first incarnation' as a magazine; a 'second incarnation' as an insert of a version of the text 'Post-media Operators' distributed with two vinyl record releases In an edition of 100 distributed by Hot Mix record distributors and 1500 by Fat Cat Records as an insert for a split 12" EP by Ad Vanz Vs Gescom / Foehn; a 'third incarnation' of *Break/Flow* lists twenty-three published and unpublished texts, flyers and interventions in other publications (notably *Noisegate*, *Datacide* and *Autotoxicity*), or self-published and distributed by Slater as single texts. The 'fourth incarnation' is the aforementioned EP and the 'fifth' or 'future incarnation' is a projected 'small run *Break/Flow* pamphlet on Marcel Proust', 'Break/Flow', *Infotainment*, London: Info Centre, No.2, 1998, pp.11-12.

74 This index, numbering releases just as on the inventories of small independent record labels, is a kind of 'inventory', and can be understood in its approximation of the practices of capitalist firms tracking their product via serial numbers and production runs. The self-consciously small scale of production and the representation of index as 'work', art work even, also returns us to conceptual art, for example Art & Language's, *Index* (1972-1973). A key framing of conceptual art in terms of media and information was the exhibition *Information*, curated by Kynaston McShine at Museum of Modern Art 1970. For Info Centre / Infopool's engagement with legacies of conceptual art see Howard Slater, 'The Spoiled Ideals of Lost Situations - Some Notes on Political Conceptual Art', *Infopool*, No. 2, 2000, available, <http://infopool.antipool.org/hs.htm> [Accessed, 7 July, 2017].

aid directing readers or listeners where to find more iterations of *Break/Flow* product.<sup>75</sup>

Here, seriality is a concern which extends through the (multiple) forms of the text and mode of distribution (via record distribution networks, audio, radio). The regular *Infotainment* newsletter circulated by Info Centre was organised similarly to *Inventory* with a list of contents on its front page. This is particularly notable in *Infotainment* No.2 (the issue which included Slater's *Break/Flow* index and *Inventory*'s poster project) because the issue is entirely made up of single or two-page contributions by groups and journal projects. Among other magazines, this includes a single page contribution by *Art-Language*, the journal of Art & Language, one of a number of overlaps between *Inventory* and *Art-Language* in external publications.<sup>76</sup> This cements the association with conceptual art, at least as one mode of formal organisation among many used at Info Centre, not only because of that movement's general prevalence for printed matter and technologies of mechanical reproducibility, but also because it recalls the flattening and equalising form of presentation and mode of invitation that projects emanating from the politicised wing of conceptual art took.<sup>77</sup> Lucy Lippard has written of these seminal paper-based conceptual art projects, '[c]ommunication (but not community) and distribution (but not accessibility) were inherent in Conceptual art. [...] However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed'.<sup>78</sup>

It seems worth considering how, formally, Info Centre restaged some of the modes and concerns of conceptual art, particularly interests in systems and processes, but tended to direct these away from 'art-referential[ity]' and instead towards the social and political, this included radical reconceptualisations of community. Also, it is worth considering how, without making great claims, the IC was a staging post for many 'escape attempts' gathered briefly through the IC's publications, displays or discussions. Distribution is a core area of reflection in the Slater's text, he suggests post-

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75 This was common in the self-publishing scene, publications frequently reproduced lists of back issues and other related publications. See Jason Skeet and Mark Pawson (Eds.), *Counter Intelligence: Zines, Comics, Pamphlets, Flyers : Catalogue of Self-Published and Autonomous Print-Creations*. 121 Centre, 1995, is a notable attempt to both list an extensive range of publications, provide resources for self-publishers and 'auto-theorise' this small cultural activity in political terms.

76 Cf. John Russell (Ed.), *Frozen Tears*, Birmingham: ARTicle Press, University of Central England, 2003, *Indent: a Project by Virginia Nimarkoh*, op. cit.; *Everything Magazine*, No.3., 1999 and *Infotainment* No.2, 1998.

77 For Seth Siegelau's *Xerox Book* (1968-1969) and *March 1-31, 1969* each artist's contribution was measured by page count and the resulting publication was the sole manifestation of the 'exhibition' whose executed works remained distributed internationally, or simply conceptually remote from any accessible physical site. Moma.org, 'This is the Way Your Leverage Lies: the Seth Siegelau Papers as Institutional Critique', <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/siegelau/> [Accessed 13/07/2017]. Information about these two projects is available in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 ...* Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973, p.63 and p.79.

78 *Six Years*, op. cit., p.xvi.

media is ‘a resistance to the monopoly of the means of distribution by means of becoming expressed by a misuse of the increasingly available means of production.’<sup>79</sup> This reflects very closely *Inventory*’s own statements on their promiscuous attitude towards media:

*Inventory*’s collections [...] are a fluid mass of paper, photos, objects, stickers, labels, in fact anything that may offer differing constellations of meaning once they have been brought into play with other polluted data that can be dredged up.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, in an interview which reflects substantially upon printed matter among other media, *Inventory* wrote that ‘*Inventory*’s approach is to make whatever you can out of whatever means are at your disposal’ and that the ‘journal offers a modular, serial, portable and disposable form from which to communicate with others.’<sup>81</sup>

## From Era to Operator

Drawing from his own performative rebuttal to normative claims about language<sup>82</sup>, Slater suggests that in the context of post-media we can substitute media for language – in the sense that media, like language, are the product of social labour, not given or natural forms but historical and open to transformation through modality – and understand the ways that ‘post-media operators’ denature media, and displace smooth transmissions by playing medium and media against themselves and introducing elements of surprise or uncanniness. These self-consciously minor media forms are therefore ‘revelatory’ of their ‘means of construction and production... and, importantly, always tending elsewhere, towards groups and collaborations, towards beginnings.’<sup>83</sup>

For Slater, post-media describes an attitude, mode and description of tendencies within culture. Instead of using the concept, as Guattari understood it, to contend with post-modernism – as a tool of periodisation, describing an ‘era’ – Slater tends to lay emphasis on the shift from mass to minor media, and the shift from artistic subjects or ‘producers’ of culture to consumer/producer or ‘operator’.<sup>84</sup> In this context Gary Genosko has drawn attention to Jean-François Lyotard’s

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79 ‘Post-Media Operators: Sovereign and Vague’, op. cit., p.18.

80 Ibid.

81 ‘Inventory Questionnaire’, *Indent*, op. cit., p.35

82 Howard Slater, ‘Post-media Operators: an Imaginary Address’, <http://infopool.antipool.org/Stamm.htm> [Accessed 4/07/2017] dated as Break/Flow (22/9/98).

83 Ibid.

84 ‘my focus back then seemed to be, in changing the emphasis of Guattari’s ‘post media era’ into that of ‘post media

interpretation of the modern, or modernist, constitution of the ‘post-’ in post-modernism, which ‘has the sense of a simple succession’, and ‘is itself perfectly “modern”’.<sup>85</sup> Genosko characterises Guattari’s theorisation as working against such diachronic logic, ‘a hallmark of Guattari’s thought is the refusal of phasal developmental schemas and an insistence on simultaneous elaboration and a “co-mingling polyphony”’.<sup>86</sup> It is this sense of process, simultaneity and polyphony which Slater retains in his ‘minor’ radicalisation of post-media, and these are qualities we see repeatedly affirmed across *Inventory*’s texts and in their approach to publishing.<sup>87</sup>

The retheorisation of post-media refers to the condition of acting on ones’ own condition, becoming self-mediated and mediated by potential allies, a form of ‘sovereignty’ on *Inventory* and Slater’s terms.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, Slater’s auditory performance becomes exemplary of post-media practice and of ‘auto-theorisation’, because it pits a self-differing subject against conventional norms of self-presentation and self-expression, inscribing liveness into a struggle to access means of self-expression without falling into predictable markers of understanding. Post-media retains the critique of categories established by post-modernism, but does not propose to supplant-modernism nor become hegemonic in culture. It is critical from the perspective of being or *becoming* ‘minor’ and critical within the wider and overwhelming field of (mass) media. Post-media is not understood as a growing hegemony of specific technical devices or standards, rather it works against the establishment of norms and conformities as capitalist technique integrates and entrains the possibilities offered by new media. I understand this as something *Inventory* responded to in their occasionally awkward formulations against ‘naming’ in the account of their method.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, post-media operators are not so enamoured by the ‘new’, rather they are a ‘not new’, critical recombination of the new and old, the prototype and the seemingly obsolete are both of interest.<sup>90</sup>

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operators’, one of continuing a kind of mass media critique [...] whilst also shifting a creative emphasis from the authorial voice of the producers to the so-called passive consumers of culture.’ Howard Slater, ‘Unparaphraseable Life Notes on Third Cinema’, unpublished draft, 2017.

85 Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Note on the Meaning of “Post-”’, in *The Postmodern Explained*, (Trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.89-93, p.90.

86 Gary Genosko, ‘The Promise of Post-Media’, in *Provocative Alloys*, op. cit. pp.15-25, p.15.

87 Here I am referring to Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari’s theory of ‘minor literature’ developed in their analysis of the works of Franz Kafka. This is clearly both influential to Guattari’s theory of post-media and a strong influence on Slater’s development of post-media: ‘The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.’ Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p.18.

88 The canonical version of Slater’s post-media text is subtitled, possibly under *Inventory*’s influence, ‘sovereign and vague’.

89 ‘Although such a sociology could be construed as a form of diagnostics, it should have nothing to do with naming. The complex forces and phenomena of everyday life make themselves felt, touch us, and, sometimes stare ourselves all in the face; but does it really take a name to make this visible, quantifiable, so as to surrender itself to knowledge?’

90 In this light, it is worth considering two critical essays published in *Inventory* focussing on the early development and popular conceptualisation of the internet; Joe Lewis, ‘Internet as Rhizome’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.111-127 and Josephine Berry, ‘Another Orwellian Misnomer’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.58-83.

Slater, himself, dismisses ‘cyber-mania’ of the time and later reflected on the conscious choice not to focus on a spurious ‘communications revolution of the internet’.<sup>91</sup>

For practitioners, it was not the hype, but the opportunities for combination and expression that made technological and regulatory frameworks significant.<sup>92</sup> This is why despite its seeming archaism, the journal form offered *Inventory* a medium, not quite obsolete and incorporative of other media, ‘from which to communicate with others’.<sup>93</sup> Post-media practice establishes its own temporality, contrasting the near-instantaneity of contemporary media with sensitivity to lived time.<sup>94</sup> For *Inventory* the semblance between the journal as communifying vehicle of potentially collaborative writing and action and the new formats of digitised writing are not, since ‘the internet is too limited and privileged a space to depend on solely’, a question of finding a single medium, but rather of the assembly of media which can be used effectively and meaningfully.<sup>95</sup>

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91 ‘Whilst not attending so much to the up and coming communications revolution of the internet and its eventual social media platforms, my focus back then seemed to be, in changing the emphasis of Guattari’s ‘post media era’ into that of ‘post media operators’, one of continuing a kind of mass media critique (maybe most quickly grasped as Chomsky’s ‘manufacturing consent’) whilst also shifting a creative emphasis from the authorial voice of the producers to the so-called passive consumers of culture.’ (Howard Slater, ‘Unparaphraseable Life Notes on Third Cinema’, unpublished draft,). Recently, Josephine Berry and I summarised: ‘Post-media then, cannot simply be equated with the digital convergence and networking of media: it remains instead a tactics of singularisation and subjectification immanent to capitalism’s programmatic conversion of all technologies into conduits of conformity.’ Josephine Berry Slater & Anthony Iles, ‘Provocative Alloys: An Introduction’, *Provocative Alloys*, op. cit., p.11.

92 ‘The Promise of Post-Media’, op. cit., pp.15-16. The structural questions this issue raises, something Guattari evidently did not appear to care for much, according to Genosko, are returned to at the end of this chapter.

93 ‘Inventory Questionnaire’ in *Indent*, op. cit., p.35.

94 ‘The post-media way of doing things can be seen as establishing a direct and communal communication, one that is accessible and closer to a practice whose effects, not unfolding in an immediately forgettable mediatised instant, reach fruition over periods that resuscitate an awareness of the passage of time.’ ‘Post-media Operators: an Imaginary Address’, op. cit., n.p.

95 ‘Inventory Questionnaire’, *Indent*, op. cit., pp.35–36.





Image: (top) Inventory's 'Wall Newspapers' poster displayed on the streets and (bottom) at Info Centre

## Post-Media Magazines

These aspects, of time, incompleteness and collectivity assist developing a framework for interpretation of *Inventory*, but as I have shown above, particularly at Info Centre, it is a framework they actively helped to shape. Slater argued that ‘practice is happening all the time’ and this statement was drawn on in defining the IC’s interest in presenting magazines,

Magazine publishing by artists and other cultural producers is a practice thing.  
(Normally) it is not just one event – one issue – but a series of events – series of issues.  
It is a vector of activity and thought [...] Publishing is a way of entering into more or less common flows of language and visions and establishing new uses.<sup>96</sup>

This short text effectively framed the Wall Newspapers exhibition and reading room to which *Inventory* contributed. It resonates closely with *Inventory*’s statements about their choice of the journal as a form:

A journal offers a modular, serial, portable and disposable form from which to communicate with others. It is simultaneously intimate and expansive. It offers access and availability. We wanted to express ideas that were not being discussed in other publications and we wanted to adopt and misuse genres of writing that have been trodden on by everyone from journalists to academics.<sup>97</sup>

Further context to the exhibition was provided by an interview in the same issue of *Infotainment* with Jason Skeet about self-publishing and his Counterintelligence project, organised at the squatted 121 Centre in Brixton, which gathered publications whose eclecticism he defined as ‘totally uncategorizable’ presenting them as ‘expressions of autonomy, of a desire to do something solely for the sake of doing it.’<sup>98</sup> A picture comes into view, by dint of Slater’s own contribution to *Inventory* and the mixing with other groups and publications at Info Centre – the site of Slater’s ‘imaginary address’ and context in which the theory of post-media operators was elaborated – of *Inventory* as one of the many ‘post-media magazines, journals, record labels, web-sites etc.’ referred to by Slater.<sup>99</sup> In turn *Inventory* themselves cite Slater’s *Break/Flow* as a ‘notable exception’ in

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96 Jakob Jakobsen and Henriette Heise, ‘Info Centre’, *Infotainment*, No.2, 1998, p.17

97 ‘Inventory Questionnaire’, *Indent*, op. cit., p.35.

98 Jason Skeet, ‘Email to Jakobsen and Heise Re: self-published and autonomous print creations’. *Infotainment*, No.2, 1998, p.16.

99 Howard Slater, ‘Post-media Operators: an Imaginary Address’, <http://infopool.antipool.org/Stamm.htm> [Accessed

discussion of 'independent publications they are 'influenced by'.<sup>100</sup> Within Slater's theory of post-media operators and the context of Info Centre as something co-constituted by *Inventory* as a loosely collective practice and a context they could recognise themselves within.<sup>101</sup>

What we have in the magazines, journals, labels and web-sites is a kind of febrile communication that legitimises itself; generates its own self-confidence and works laterally rather than vertically. In many ways post-media operations aspire to invisibility in that, as with the web-site programmer, they dissolve behind a fledgling community or subsist beneath their obsession. A hazardous poise.<sup>102</sup>

If Info Centre and Infopool were interested in 'information' and classification then, the 'vagueness' celebrated by Slater above allowed for a mimetic disruption of the techniques 'aesthetics of administration'. In distinction from the po-faced mimesis of administrative technique in conceptual art, the initiatives developed at Info Centre tended to 'pollute' these forms with social concerns and the needs of everyday life. This is particularly present in the self-conscious antagonism towards smooth online information exchange evident in the scene's uses of the internet,<sup>103</sup>

Advancements in technology have meant that all manner of equipment is now available for re-appropriation by whoever has the time to learn how to use, re-define, misuse and re-wire it.<sup>104</sup>

In an early essay on jungle music in the first issue of *Inventory*, Damian Abbott argued that 'digitisation increases the concrete properties of the recording' changing it from 'a primarily passive process to one offering almost infinite possibilities for manipulation.'<sup>105</sup> Whilst Abbott goes into some detail of the techniques employed, what matters most is the transformation of sound into malleable and multiple object, reversal from passive listener, or recording devices, to, as Slater puts it, the 'listener as operator'. The post-media attitude is then less about specific technique or technology than a punky refusal to use things properly.<sup>106</sup> Whilst, the atmosphere at Info Centre was

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4/07/2017] dated as Break/Flow (22/9/98).

100 'Inventory Questionnaire' in *Indent*, op. cit., p.36.

101 The addition of the subheading 'sovereign and vague' adds a particularly strong case for assuming Slater is indeed referring to *Inventory* as one of the practices exemplary of post-media operators'.

102 'Post-media Operators: an Imaginary Address', op. cit.

103 A good example of an art work in this context is Matthew Fuller, Colin Green, and Simon Pope's *Webstalker* (1997-1998), a web browser which disfigured and broke the html-designed interfaces of websites in order to reveal underlying infrastructures of the internet. Cf. <https://anthology.rhizome.org/the-web-stalker>

104 'Post-media Operators', *Datacide* No.2, c.1997.

105 Damian Abbot, 'Hall of Mirrors', *Inventory*, No.1 Vol.1, 1995, pp.14-18, p.14.

106 These positions are close to Walter Benjamin's pronouncements in the 'Surrealism' essay and the second version of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility' (1936) where the German philosopher imagines a

distinctly calmer and cooler than a rave, the do-it-yourself approach, hedonism, appropriation of consumer technologies and (sometimes illegal or legally vague) occupation of industrial and commercial space took place close by to Info Centre and exerted a strong influence over the space. This was registered most clearly within Howard Slater's catch-all conceptualisation of 'post-media' but also by the Autonomous Astronauts with their proposals for a 'rave in space', audio-visual club nights and mimicry of the tropes of space travel through popular culture (e.g. Sun Ra, 'Space is the Place') and available technologies.<sup>107</sup> *Inventory*'s glossary and some artworks referenced London squatting culture at the time and their performances and individual writing would explore the music and decentralised performative communication (via pirate radio) of rave culture e.g. through their Endless Sonic Mania and Inventory FM radio projects.<sup>108</sup>

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situation in which 'technology body and image [...] interpenetrate' and elsewhere proposes a 'second technology' which does not aim to master nature but allows for an 'interplay between nature and humanity'. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism', in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: NLB, 1979, p.239. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility', *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. (Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland), Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp.101–133, p.108 (emphasis in the original). Benjamin's interpenetration of 'technology, body and image' would be an apt description for sonic-visual-dance synergy of warehouse raves still widespread in the late-1990s.

107 Howard Slater, alongside Neil Transpontine AKA Disconaut (member of AAA and editor/publisher of *Fatuous Times*), Christoph Fringeli (editor/publisher of *Datacide*), Jason Skeet (member of AAA and editor of *Counter Intelligence*) and John Eden (founding member of AAA and editor/publisher of *Turbulent Times*), was one of the organisers for a series of Dead by Dawn parties which took place at the 121 Centre in Railton Rd. The format for the parties was a discussion organised under the auspices of 'the Invisible College' with theoretical presentations by invited speakers (e.g. Sadie Plant) early on in the evening followed by music and audio-visual projections til dawn, see Neil Transpontine, 'Dead by Dawn, Brixton, 1994-96', September 29, 2007, <http://history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.co.uk/2007/09/dead-by-dawn-brixton-1994-96.html> [Accessed 17 July 2017]

108 Inventory FM 107.6 at Teeth and Trousers (Ideal House, London E8) 27th July 2001 (Exhibition ran 28th July-12th August). Inventory FM also featured in Casco and Luke Fowler's project The Technology of Tears, 3-20 November, 2001 cf. <http://www.cascoprojects.org> and <http://www.radiointerference.nl> [Accessed 17 July 2017]; Broad Cast, Saturday, Curated by Polly Staple at Cubitt Gallery, London, 25 May 2002 and A Short History of Performance II, Whitechapel Gallery, 2003, [http://white.cyberporte.net/content.php?page\\_id=414](http://white.cyberporte.net/content.php?page_id=414) [Accessed 17 July 2017]. There were several other radio events both in private and public locations in the UK and abroad. See also, Anthony Iles, 'Endless Sonic Mania, *Mute*, Vol.1 No.22, 10 December 2001, available, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/endless-sonic-mania-inventory-fm> [Accessed 17 July 2017]



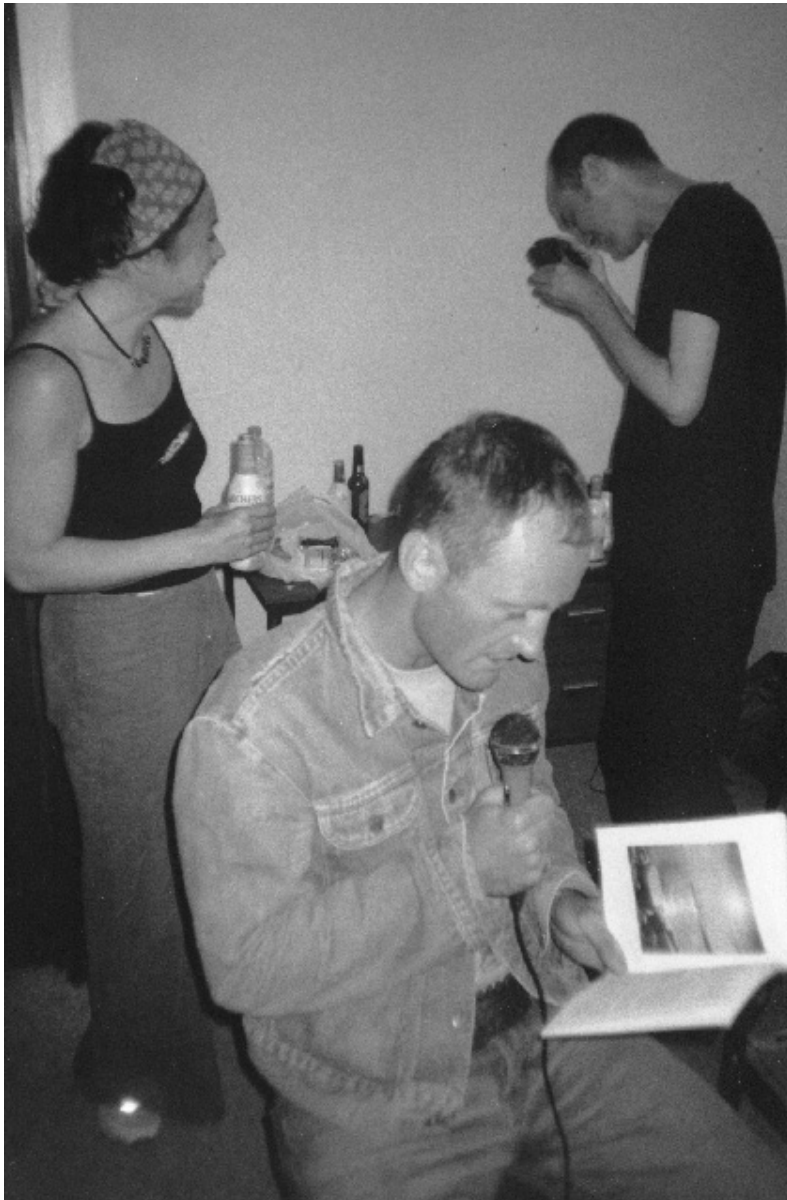


Image: (top left) *Inventory* editors Damian Abbott and Adam Scrivener radio broadcasting from Casco, Utrecht, 2001 (right) Adam Scrivener and (bottom left) Paul Claydon at Cell Projects, Teeth and Trousers, Cell Projects, 2001

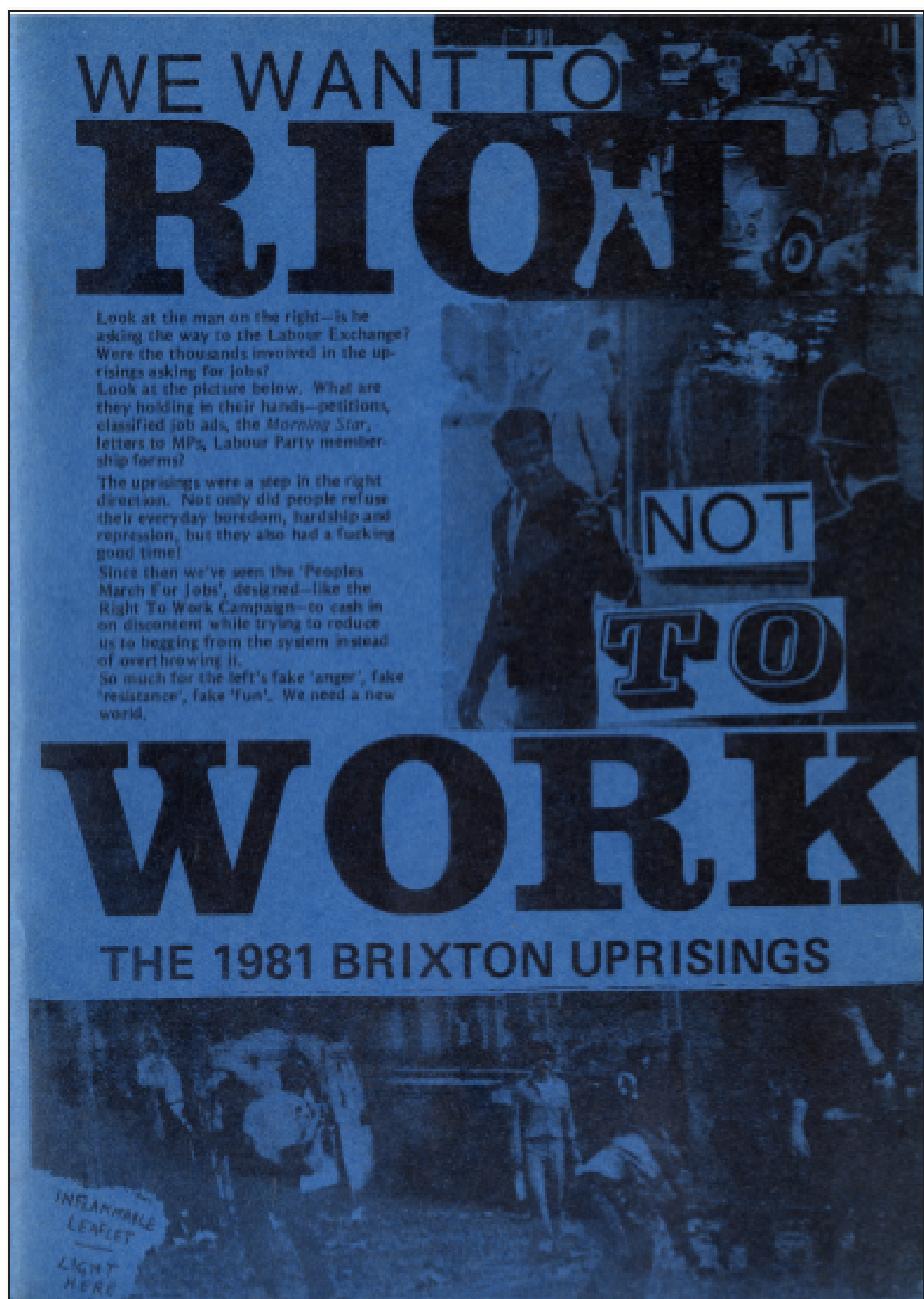


Image: Anon. *We Want to Riot Not Work*, Unpopular Books/Red Notes. Pamphlet on the 1981 Brixton Riots (note bottom left reads 'inflammable leaflet | light here' an association referenced in Inventory's *Flying Fiery Roll artists'* page discussed in Chapter 2 p.100. Those assembled at Info Centre frequently made their knowledge of earlier milestones of radical publishing known through the creative reuse of such devices).

# New Acéphale

Prior to their mutual collaboration with Info Centre, and the publication of the ‘Sovereign & Vague’ version of ‘Post-media Operators’, Howard Slater contributed a short essay to *Inventory* entitled ‘New Acéphale’.<sup>109</sup> This text develops *Inventory*’s interests in community and sociality by drawing directly on the legacy of Bataille’s heterodox groups. We can imagine that these ingredients were radicalised and drawn into meaningful circulation through ‘discussions’ at Info Centre.

‘Discussions’ is possibly a contentious way to formulate this, because not only were events at IC resolutely informal, and based around socialising rather than formal talks, Slater is keen to emphasise at the end of this text, ‘we have no project other than the reiteration of a sensitised and non-discursive communism.’<sup>110</sup> A ‘sensitised and non-discursive communism’ is suggestive of the limits of discourse (a theme explored in *Inventory* journal through various experiments with glossolalia and frustration of dominant forms of administrative writing) and the necessity for political organising to accommodate an affective dimension. The sense of ‘no project’ then, is similarly evident in *Inventory*’s self-descriptions e.g. as a ‘perishable, fragmentary, yet joyous non-project.’<sup>111</sup> Slater’s essay is, of course, also a contribution to the reexamination of political currents of surrealism explored by other contributions in *Inventory* journal.<sup>112</sup> The text can also be read as a kind of surrealist text in itself, since it goes beyond analysis of the past to act as a kind of programme for a new surrealist grouping: a ‘New Acéphale’. Another approach to the text would be to place it in relation to the temporary community formation which Info Centre catalysed, albeit after the text was written. Bataille’s Acéphale was of course a secret group formed immediately after his participation in a number of political formations.<sup>113</sup> Acéphale represented both a realisation of themes which had surfaced in Bataille’s journals and groups but gave up on ‘direct political

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109 Howard Slater, ‘New Acephale’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.71-75.

110 ‘New Acephale’, op. cit., p.75.

111 *Inventory*, ‘Fierce Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8, p.5. A tendency reiterated at the end of the journal’s lifespan when in a gesture of self-directed sovereignty the group ended the journal, which itself reflects the statements around the dissolution of both Info Centre as a project and Copenhagen Free University, cf. Copenhagen Free University Abolition Committee, ‘We Have Won’, 2007, <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/won.html> [Accessed 20 November, 2017]

112 In this sense it could be grouped with other related attempts to use the legacies of surrealism and conceptual art, but also other diverse literary traditions to generate experimental writing in the pages of *Inventory* (within this current Steve Beard, Victoria Halford, Nick Norton, Steve Claydon and Neil Chapman’s contributions are all notable).

113 Including the Democratic Communist Circle, the Marxian journal *La Critique Sociale* and Contre-Attaque. Although members were asked not to talk publicly about the group, with Andre Masson and Pierre Klossowski, Bataille formed a journal of the same name, *Acéphale* (1936-1939).



action' in favour of a more isolated and internally oriented small group.<sup>114</sup>

Slater, *Inventory* and others assembled at Info Centre shared a scepticism of established formal politics: of groups, parties, discussion fora, manifestos, 'class-as-identity', speeches and marches. Many had travelled the long road of decomposition of the workers' movement and the left, participating in protest movements, parties and smaller groupuscules. This wariness, as Slater puts it in 'New Acéphale', extended to even semi-imaginary groups: '[a]ny group must put itself in doubt in this way for no sooner does it try to encapsulate and ideologise its vectors than it opens itself up to an insensate manipulation.'<sup>115</sup> For Slater, amidst a society built-up of 'rackets', the 'group as subject' (Félix Guattari) has to ward off 'ulterior motives' and produce itself as 'a means towards withstanding and retaliating against the security of achievement, of maintaining an objectiveless direction.'<sup>116</sup> This formulation of the 'group as subject' drew elements from communist theoretical conceptualisation of the class as subject, but sublated it within a more open form, one not dependent upon a strict working class or productive labour identity (generally male, white, heroic and so on). Instead, the potential for radical or revolutionary subjectivity in and against capital is conferred upon imaginary or semi-fictional combinations of subjects: 'ensembles', 'clusters', the 'coagulum', in *Inventory*'s texts.

## Phantom Organisations

Such groupings, following in the footsteps of Acéphale, can be considered, in Slater's terms, 'Phantom organisations': 'imaginary groupings of one or several that offer some means of conceptual secession, some means of supported self-exile from those hermetic orthodoxies for whom counter-cultural activists are, as "culturalists", not to be taken seriously.'<sup>117</sup> The label 'phantom organisation' was picked up and recirculated by many of the groups affiliated with Info

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114 Yet the view of this as a closed group of initiates must be tempered both by the group's continued politics of anti-fascism, and by the presence of a two different but overlapping groups who contributed to the publication of an eponymous journal and the public activities of the College of Sociology. 'the College was, in Klossowski's phrase, the "exoterising emanation of the closed and secret group of Acephale", in other words, its public manifestation.' Marina Galletti quoting Pierre Klossowski in Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Leiris, Alastair Brotchie, Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, Meyer Barash, and André Masson, *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*. Ed. Marina Galletti, London: Atlas press, 2017, p.46.

115 Howard Slater, 'New Acéphale', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.71-75.p.72

116 Ibid.

117 Howard Slater, 'Burdened By the Absence of Billions', 18 September 2008, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/burdened-absence-billions> [Accessed 17 July 2017]

Centre. For the Association of Autonomous, a 'collective phantom is an identity that anyone can adopt, and which can operate within the wider context of popular culture.'<sup>118</sup> We can understand this as a form of 'left mythopoesis', of which the anonymous collectivity known as *Inventory* becomes at Info Centre a central example. Here, the invention of organisation was seen to be in itself a creative and political act. The elasticity of a phantom organisation could be seen to supersede the failings and dissimulations of *real* organisations.

Thus, the open network for which IC operated as a brief outpost navigated itself towards an exit from forms of inclusion/exclusion operating within left in-groups. 'The AAA has developed the collective phantom Exit Strategy', through this strategy the AAA made their moniker available to both groups and individuals to develop activities under its banner, a move which escalated the swift internationalisation of the AAA 'network'.<sup>119</sup> Fantasy, spectral collectivity and exit from formal organisations are twinned motors of a movement away from a politics of recognition and recruitment. *Inventory* editor Damian Abbott participated in the events of the AAA and associated with their 'Five Year Plan' project, of which their exhibition at IC was also a part, by staging a multi-media audio-visual night of 'extra-terrestrial cinema' entitled *My Eyes, My Eyes*.<sup>120</sup>

The AAA's slogan, 'moving in many directions at once', displayed a wall of IC in Hackney remains one of the more memorable images from its short life. The slogan serves to encourage the view of the space as the site of uncontainable diversity, plurality and as a base without a strict program from which to lift off in different directions. Here I have tried to establish the commonality and crossing influences between Slater, other practices grouped at IC and *Inventory*, and its resonances with their understanding of Georges Bataille. The group, class and community are significant but deliberately 'vague' areas of study with regard to *Inventory*, and this shall be reflected upon and reconsidered further towards the end of this chapter and in the conclusion to this study.

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118 Association of Autonomous Astronauts, 'Declarations and Exit Strategies', *Infotainment*, London: Info Centre, No.6, 1999, p.3.

119 Ibid.

120 Held at Strike, 11-29 Fashion Street, London, 19 June, 1999.

film · space travel · performance · life support · music

< SPACE 1999 TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE UNIVERSE: Festival of Independent, Community-Based Space Exploration >



MY EYES  
MY EYES

etc

extra terrestrial cinema

8pm 19th June 99 **STRIKE** 11-29 Fashion St. E1

Tubes: Aldgate East/L'pool St Donations £4/£3  
<http://www.deepdisc.com/space1999/> Contact: 0181 858 5983

featuring: <Ticklish> live electronica + DJs: DoA and Lee Dolby

Image: Flyer for My Eyes My Eyes, 19 June 1999, Strike, London





Image: London Psychogeographical Association Newsletters displayed at Info Centre, c.1999



## SALON/SOVIET (6)

### CIVIL SONG

"From the anthropological point of view – that is to say, as far as the foundation of a new culture is concerned – this new capitalist revolution demands from men with no links with the past... that they should live as far as the quality of life, of behaviour and values is concerned, in a state of what one might call weightlessness: a state which allows them to accord to consumption and the satisfaction of its hedonistic demands the privilege of being the only possible existential act" – Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975)

Psyche ache. A  
Coranic Kapitalistic  
death wish with which  
to hide from history:  
Hiroshima, Dresden  
and more recently  
a continuous Baghdad  
an abridged Belgrade.

The collision of death  
shocks out a clarity:  
that the will to die,  
a steered plane,  
stills only the end  
of will, an automatic  
telling – what built  
the biblicalised towers,  
the delusion, still stands.

To accept occult powers –  
to be bemused and confused,  
to be operated upon –  
is to loose our sensibility  
of sensuous relation,  
our sense of history  
as sensible intelligibility,  
as rescened becoming.

War claws in the wake of  
psychotic generality, but may  
be protective of nothing as  
much as a Unocal pipeline  
projected towards market futures  
already levelled and secured  
by the reinsurance of rights.

Figures reeling in graphs  
and curves and as  
adjuncts to maps, numbers  
switchedback in volumes  
of crash and razing, are  
the abstracted presentism of  
our alienable emotions, our  
undoubted ability to exploit.

I feel nothing for the narcissists  
who, in their weightless anti-willing,  
can feel nothing for the poor;  
irresponsibly unresponsive  
to a history that, for them, is  
simply a tragic screening;  
auto-attracted to the gross  
coveted nature of towers that  
serve as landmarks to the occlusion  
of unseen, localised, atrocities.

This is capitalism's entropic  
spectacle, a society of signs in a  
slow ticking of 'autistic multiplicity' (1)  
– an unequalled rivalry of psychic  
protectionism aghast at its own  
insulated emotional privation,  
mourning the loss of its  
decapitated innocence.

Only morals and morale are  
left – death visited for  
the first time from the main  
place it is sent, daily sent  
out to revisit and return to  
continually revive survival as  
the name of a enmartyred game.

Millions to die would not retract  
the pride of the patricians, a  
pride that's a magma of boyish  
bullishness, sanctimonious  
operating profits and frigid words:  
the derricks of law war recrushing  
the 'unexpressed existents' (2)

Mossad's or Bin Laden's  
work or the work that is  
allowed to happen? Or the  
work that continues because  
some, too many, allow history  
to be too mute, allow the  
security of commodity to  
nationalise them – an all round  
failure of an all round intelligence.

We are slick and helpless  
because we do not heed our  
occult psyche, do not listen to  
the ache of power – instead we  
are lead towards a phantasy of  
unreflective reproduction, a  
grist of air-conditioned mills.



A no-fly zone over London, at least for civil aircraft; so what then are those only audible vapour trails – are they a military rearrangement, a job lot of defensive self-worth, an undiscloseable accumulation of aftermaths?

Is it possible to claim as premonition the inevitability of multiple occupation? A worse than word war is in the offing, hoping to settle some impending scores, to consolidate empire, hoping to finally turn the square world into a scorched and enbaroned presupposition of capital – the eradication of the other as subversive seed.

The cataracts of the newly enrolled mask the eyes of the dogmatic who know no such word as dogma; children spill out flags of entrained duty, lapel ribbons subvert the liberalist threat, patriotism equates corpses to the business of belonging undeterred to costs.

More grants for the marketed lay-offs, more medals to the humans awarded for their service to survival as the meaning of our social – we're subsisting, we're in the satellite shadow of a repressed ideal civilization.

In this orgy of automatic propaganda every 'x' is mobilized, every signifier threads its way through an enchained and enchantable psyche, to affirm the introjected connection of self to nation, monad to mad dad, debtee to debtor.

Every shot of a supposed real is inflected by the entrancement of ideal conformities, untroubled, dutiful belongings. In an expansion of its remit of rights the formerly and formally excluded are reinfolded into the insincere oval core of stock-economic sinecures. Such scopical liberalism tends to the end of alterity, the abolition of living culture.

Language has been annexed: 'operation infinite injustice', whereby the revelling allies pose as allah, comes to sing an exegetic exposure: 'operation enduring freedom' speaks its own subjects' enslaved ennui and reveals full well that there is always 'the war after the war' (3) – a social war against monetrist trysts and the succour of rough trade pleasures.

In a severed-off aftermath that can admit of no prehistory it is emotions that are on display in a brokerage of ostentatious humanness – a logoless racing car will lap in black, excusing itself with its newly won right to earn, attracting us to consider our having lost the object to the commodity.

Need to weep like Pasolini – fully exposed – wept to legitimate the formation of desire, an 'honest food' (4) that needs preparing, that pities itself only as it pities its other selves, that is raw and cooked, false and real, that seeks not to show but to dialecticise its ache, to weep for something other, something much more engrossing than itself.

Our only chance is in mutual exposure, a commuting perversity finally acknowledged as the beginning of our defiant being together as becoming against identity – the origin in each as the instaneity of history where not one is sovereign over accruing blocs of either or.

'Accattone'  
@ Movement of the  
12th-26th September, 2001

#### NOTES

- [1] Jean-Luc Nancy: *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press 2000, pxiii.
- [2] Pier Paolo Pasolini: *Plan Of Future Works in Selected Poems*, Marion Boyars 1984, p189.
- [3] Title of a pamphlet written by Scottish Communist John MacLean in 1918.
- [4] This sector took its impetus from Pasolini's poem *Reality*, *ibid*, p119.

## The Ends of Identity

Another constellation involved at Info Centre facilitates connection between ‘left mythopoesis’ and a contemporary politics of anti-fascism. Prompted by the election of BNP Councillor Derek Beackon in an East London Borough in 1993, explorations by Stewart Home, Fabian Tompsett and others of the relationship between neo-nazi movements and the occult developed, as with the partisans of Contre-Attaque, out of the confrontation with fascists and neo-fascists in the streets. In the UK a prior decade of streetfighting resulted in the definitive rout of fascist’s street presence in 1992 at the so-called Battle of Waterloo.<sup>121</sup> However, two consequences resulted. Firstly an internal critique of anti-fascist groups who had developed an identitarian, macho and violent subculture dedicated to confronting fascists. Secondly, as neo-fascists and racists were forced underground they turned to the exploration of occult forms, myths and more obscure fascist positions in order to renew their politics.<sup>122</sup> Tactics of mimesis and misinformation had turned out to be a winning tactic in the fight against neo-fascists on the streets and this can be conceived of as a practical critique of the identity politics which had otherwise strongly demarcated 1970s and 1980s subcultures.<sup>123</sup>

*Inventory* followed these developments closely.<sup>124</sup> In his study of Thamesmead Estate, situated in a borough which had one of the highest rates of racist murders in England at the time<sup>125</sup>, Abbott writes ‘The National Front and the British National Party have, since the seventies, been well known to recruit members from the football terraces and street gangs, but neither the structure nor the attitude of the gangs are easily appropriated by the ideological dead ends of the right (or the left for that matter).’<sup>126</sup> In Abbott’s, and elsewhere *Inventory*’s, conception such loose social formations tend to ‘resist [...] these efforts at homogeneity.’<sup>127</sup> What this suggests to me are attempts to reach beyond

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121 Of interest in terms of the theme of mimesis vs identity explored by the groups under discussion in this chapter, is that a key tactic on this day involved anti-fascist groups deliberately disguised themselves as Nazis in order to dissolve themselves into the opponents crowd, avoid separation by the police then create panic and confusion by physically attacking the fascists from within their own crowd. ‘Blood and Honour routed by Anti Fascist Action at Waterloo 1992’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpXMOBmR8I>

122 This shift is fictionalised compellingly in Max Schaeffer’s novel *Children of the Sun*, London: Granta, 2010, (pp.184-189), which reproduces LPA newsletters amongst other ephemera published by both right wing and anti-fascist groups.

123 Cf. Note 99. A passage of Max Schaeffer’s novel *Children of the Sun*, cited above, describes these tactics in practice (pp.329-343).

124 One of their earliest attempts to make a video work involved filming a National Front demonstration in Bermondsey, close to Damian Abbott’s place of work, South Bank University.

125 The Royal Borough of Greenwich was the site of a number of high profile racist murders, that of Rolan Adams (February 1991) and Stephen Lawrence (April 1993), see Institute of Race Relations, ‘And the racist killings go on’, 24 February 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/feb/24/lawrence.ukcrime5> [Accessed, 7 July, 2017]

126 Damian Abbott, ‘Every Stage of Thamesmead Knows it’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.83-90, p.89.

127 Ibid.



superficial manifestations of class as appearance, as physiognomy and into the heterogeneous matrices of more complex social formations. In *Inventory*'s sticker project (multiple sites, c.2000-2002?) the social fiction of identity is attacked and ridiculed. On one hand these critiques are directed at the cultural industries for which identity is an 'object [...] which can be bought and sold', on the other towards the apparently mindless consumer comforts of 'zombie nationalism'.<sup>128</sup>

Howard Slater's 'New Acephale' had directed the critique of identity towards 'the effusions of the group.' As

a surpassing of those societal-limits that would keep us in the thrall of identification as separable, singularly expressive individuals. Picked-off by a seductive visibility: job description, intimate meetings, family units, mug-shots. [...] Work. Buy. Consume. Die. Identifying as an 'individual' leads smoothly on to a nuanceless repetition, to definition through recognition, and from there to completion and finality.<sup>129</sup>

For Slater something lies below identity, subtending it, something more fluid which could be realised only in group form, opening to process, contradiction and the unconscious, and this is evidently a shared theme across many of *Inventory*'s texts. an unpublished submission to *Inventory*, described in the accompanying correspondence as 'a "poem" about recent events', Slater revisits the themes of Acephale, as a kind of 'Soviet' or 'Salon'.<sup>130</sup>

Yet, whilst the 'poem' reflects clearly the criticism of 'identity' in the journal, the very non-publication of this text perhaps indicates a certain limit to the convergence of interests between Slater and *Inventory*.<sup>131</sup> *Inventory*'s reanimation of the surrealist project through the inception of their journal and the methodology of a fierce sociology positioned them as a critical pivot between the debunking of the myths of capitalist society and a delirious reenchantment or remythicisation of a society subject to capitalist disenchantment.

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128 *Inventory*, 'Flatliners Largin' It' and 'Rebel teen David Sims', *Sticker project*, c.2000-2002

129 'New Acéphale', op. cit., p.71.

130 'Our only chance is in mutual exposure, a commuting perversity / finally acknowledged as the beginning / of our defiant being together as becoming against identity – the / origin in each as the instantaneity of / history where no one is sovereign / over accruing blocks of either or.' Howard Slater, 'Salon/Soviet', unpublished submission to *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1, 2001 or Vol.4 No.3, 2002, n.p., p.2, private collection of Adam Scrivener.

131 In conversation with Adam Scrivener, the suggested reasons for non-publication of Slater's contribution very much centred on the journal's lack of interest in 'poetry' as perceived as a 'bourgeois' literary form. Conversation with Adam Scrivener, Toulouse August, 2017.



Rebel teen David Sims before and after he changed his clothes. He is still a rebel. The only thing different about him is his clothes.

The current conception of identity as a positive, self-affirming, agency is a myth propagated by politicians, market researchers - who in turn look for support from academia - and T.V. companies desperate to package and fill airtime. All the while everyday life carries on, at once punished by, and resistant to, these efforts at homogeneity. Nonetheless, in the age of the "youth consultant" and lifestyle politics, identity has become an object of social organisation which can be bought and sold. A tyranny of media, a lazy semiology whereby taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.

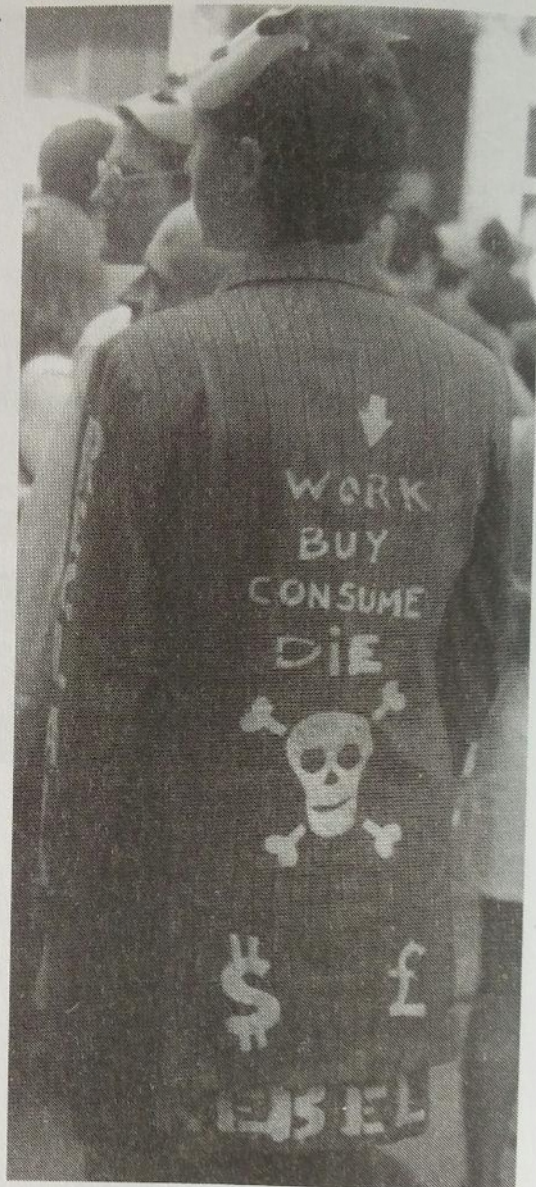
Images: (top) Inventory, 'Rebel teen David Sims', *Sticker project*, c.2000-2002. (below) Max Reeves, National Front Demonstration, undated (c.1994-5), courtesy of Max Reeves personal collection





Later, this longing for pattern, for order, derived from reflections upon nature, was sought in the socialising constructions of religion, science and technology. In religion, all funerary ritual is the attempt to smother, to repress, the acknowledgement of death. All ceremony is the rationalisation of chance. There is no ceremony, no ritual, for the moment of dying. Gradually, the prepared wait upon the family deathbed transferred to the hospital. Here death becomes the withdrawal, the resigned retreat of technological care. The technological arrogance of Western societies replaces previous methodologies for dealing with death - to the point where it has almost removed it from consciousness. Eventually, most of us will enter a hospital only to disappear from view.

The cosmetic removal of death from life has damaged our view of life. For death makes us aware of the ridiculously servile nature of contemporary capitalism, a place where all desire is diverted, all passion postponed under the yoke of a labour that constantly quantifies, measures and hoards. *Homo economicus* becomes the victim of his own belief that something physically precious must exist, something of value must be materialised, with scant regard for his fellow beings. Like an uncontrollable fire, man consumes everything in his path until, when there is nothing left, nowhere else to go, he consumes and extinguishes himself.



Nevertheless, medical science has made us believe that we can dictate the terms and conditions of death. We believe we can safely make the assumption that we have an allotted time, a time in which to build, construct and shape a career - to build some sort of purpose.

# Collective Exits

## Carnival Against Capital

Convergence between projects at Info Centre were subject to a kind of epiphany on 18 June 1999 with the Carnival Against Capital coordinated by Reclaim the Streets. The AAA's Space 1999 ten day festival of distributed events in London (18-27 June, 1999) one part of which was staged at Info Centre, coincided with the protests in London's financial centre.<sup>132</sup> Backspace, a media or hack lab provided technological infrastructure for *Inventory*, media artists and many of the activist groups participating in J18, but was also an important socialising and working space.<sup>133</sup> The festive protest involving a day of actions in and around London and in other cities around the world realised aspects of a disorganised street party with the aim to attack and disrupt finance capital in its concretised form as the formidable edifice of the City of London, London's financial district. With the rapid financialisation of the UK's economy throughout the 1980s and 1990s it was no stretch of the imagination to connect the ascendancy and confidence of the financial powerhouse of the City with rapacious neocolonial exploitation of people and nature globally and its contribution to the squeeze on living conditions of London's inhabitants locally. Indeed, *Inventory*'s text, 'The Last Days of London' makes exactly these connections.<sup>134</sup> The rules, wealth and power of this highly 'secure' zone of the city appeared ripe to be turned upside down. Thus, using it as a party space, wrecking and disturbing it with weird frequencies and out of control bodies must have felt like a visceral retort to high finance's arid and sterile organisation of space. The tactics behind the protest, which completely wrongfooted police on the day, seemed to epitomise the AAA's ambition of 'moving in several directions at once'.<sup>135</sup> At a signal, the four factions wearing masks were led off following different routes into the City to focus actions on a variety of targets and then recongregate and converge at the London International Financial Futures & Options Exchange (or Liffe building)

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132 The AAA's contribution to J18 was a 'protest against the militarisation of space, part of the J18 global festival.' Held at the British National Space Centre, near Green Park. 'Space 1999', <http://www.deepdisc.com/space1999/> [Accessed, 7 July, 2017]

133 Backspace was another notable hybrid space akin to Info Centre but more technology focussed. Backspace hosted *Inventory*'s first website and one of a number of sites set up by the organisers of Reclaim the Streets. Backspace's proximity, just near to Tower Bridge, to both central London, south and East London meant it was a key hangout space where techies, artists and activists met. <http://bak.spc.org/> [Accessed 20 February, 2017] provides access to an archive website pretty much as it was in 1998/1999.

134 Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London', *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.72-77.

135 A report by the Metropolitan and City of London police reflecting on J18, described the tactics of the protesters as engendering a 'starburst' effect. Anthony Davies, 'J18 and All That', *Proud to be Flesh*, Mute & Autonomedia: London and New York, 2013, pp.239-240 (originally published in *Mute*, Vol 1 #14, Autumn 1999).

in an effort to disrupt trading which was only partially successful.<sup>136</sup> On the interior of the masks was printed:

Those in authority fear the mask for their power partly resides in identifying, stamping and cataloguing: in knowing who you are. But a Carnival needs masks, thousands of masks. . . . Masking up releases our commonality, enables us to act together. . . . During the last years the power of money has presented a new mask over its criminal face. Disregarding borders, with no importance given to race or colors, the power of money humiliates dignities, insults honesties and assassinates hopes.<sup>137</sup>

Since ‘masking up releases our commonality’, this short text finds strong resonances with Adam Scrivener’s account of feeling ‘possessed’ by ‘ecstatic forces’ amidst the crowd dynamics of a riotous protest in Central London a decade earlier<sup>138</sup> and *Inventory*’s articulation of a politics of ‘life’: ‘for life is “more life” and “more-than-life” simultaneously [...] “this stress of itself and constant abandonment of itself is precisely the mode of its unity”’ published the very same year.<sup>139</sup> The tactic was celebrated as a widespread success. The loose organisation of the protests allowed for mass participation, not only was the city disrupted for a day generally, but many ‘grassroots direct action groups’ were able to focus directed protests on specific institutions, among them the London Metals Exchange, Lloyd’s Bank, Macdonalds, London Bridge train station and the *Evening Standard* newspaper.<sup>140</sup> This possibility of galvanising mass action using a very similar rhetoric and concerns as those developed by *Inventory* in the journal appear to have emboldened the group.

#### Attributing RTS’s success to an ‘organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and

136 At the initial meeting point masks of different colours (black, green, red, or gold – respectively the colours of anarchism, ecology, communism and finance) were distributed. Brian Holmes, ‘Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World’, in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Eds.), *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp.273-293, pp.275.  
137 RTS propaganda quoted in Brian Holmes, ‘Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World’, in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp.273-293, pp.275-276.

138 Adam Scrivener, ‘Laughter’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.86-87, p.86. ‘This was the Poll Tax riots. I had gone there with Nick, maybe Tony De Silva too? Not sure, but I lost them in Trafalgar Square. The text ‘Laughter’ describes what happened as the police applied pressure on the mass contained in the square and, eventually, people began to spill out in various directions.’ Adam Scrivener in email correspondence 24 March, 2019.

139 *Inventory*, ‘I Want More Life Fucker’, op. cit., p.4. The phrase ‘this stress of itself and constant abandonment of itself is precisely the mode of its unity’ is an unattributed quotation from Georg Simmel, ‘The Transcendent Character of Life’ in Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, (Ed. And Trans. Donald N. Levine), Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p.365.

140 These protests did not only take place in geographical space, but also included interventions in mediatic space. For example, the London-based right-wing daily newspaper, *Evening Standard*, was targeted through a spoof newspaper entitled *Evading Standards* distributed for free throughout the city on the day. Cf. Wat Tyler, ‘Dancing at the Edge of Chaos: a Spanner in the Works of Global Capitalism’, in Notes From Nowhere (Eds.), *We Are Everywhere: the Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, Verso, London/New York 2003, pp.188-195.

autonomy', Anthony Davies, contributor to discussions at Info Centre, wrote:

This form of protest is virtually impossible to gather adequate prior intelligence on – there was no central chain of command and many of the groups were not in direct communication. The resultant impact on the command and control structure of the City of London Police was unprecedented; in a recent report, Commissioner Perry Nove refers to a 'starburst' occurring at Liverpool Street Station [...] as the pivotal moment at which tactical control of the event collapsed.<sup>141</sup>

In a subsequent discussion which took place at Copenhagen Free University in 2001 Davies' views became more critical.<sup>142</sup> Noting, in the earlier text, the way that the 'level and sophistication of planning of J18 paradoxically mirrors the operational logic of corporate capitalism', he now presented Info Centre and Infopool as, 'operating within a similar set of social and cultural co-ordinates' as both J18 and the new private and public agencies networking finance capital and cultural institutions emerging in London at the end of the 1990s.<sup>143</sup> Though the initial positive assessment was in terms of practical success, gradual self-awareness developed around the coincidences between the form of organisation exemplified at J18 and several of the aesthetic-organisation paradigms assembled and presented at Info Centre. For Davies, beyond the pragmatic reasons to organise in this way, a dynamic of convergence and collusion could be understood to have developed between the informalisation of activist and cultural activities and the flexibilisation of capital.<sup>144</sup> Whilst J18 put global capitalism on the agenda in ways which no social movement had articulated before, there it also generated serious questions about both the credibility of the

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141 Anthony Davies, 'J18 and All That', *Proud to be Flesh*, Mute & Autonomedia: London and New York, 2013, pp.239-240 (originally published in *Mute*, Vol 1 No14, Autumn 1999), p.239.

142 Anthony Davies, 'The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy', a talk given at Copenhagen Free University, 29th September 2001, reproduced as a pamphlet and available, <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/AD01.html> [Accessed 3 December 2017]

143 Anthony Davies, 'The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy', a talk given at Copenhagen Free University, 29th September 2001, reproduced as a pamphlet and available, <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/AD01.html> [Accessed 3 December 2017]

144 'As companies shed their physical structures, break down into strategic projects and form alliances it will become virtually impossible to identify a core. Indeed, we are witnessing the birth of an alliance culture that collapses the distinctions between companies, nation states, governments, private individuals – even the protest movement.' Anthony Davies & Simon Ford, 'Art Networks: Fin-de-siècle', [http://www.societyofcontrol.com/research/davis\\_ford.htm](http://www.societyofcontrol.com/research/davis_ford.htm) [Accessed 03/12/2018] This basic dynamic, described above, is notable across a number of texts by Davies around this period, but also in his collaborative writing with Simon Ford. Other significant texts surrounding this moment were Anthony & Simon Ford, 'Art Capital', *Art Monthly*, No.213 (February 1998), a version of this text is archived at <http://infopool.antipool.org/artcap.htm> [Accessed 3 December 2018]; Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, 'Culture Clubs', 10 September 2000, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/culture-clubs> [Accessed 3 December 2018] and Anthony Davies, 'Basic Instinct: Trauma and Retrenchment 2000-4', 9 February 2005, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/basic-instinct-trauma-and-retrenchment-2000-4> [Accessed 3 December 2018]

successes and the residual lifestylism (which can be understood in either aesthetic or political terms) of the movement. Aspects which found critics internal to the movement itself.

The activist identifies with what they do and thinks of it as their role in life, like a job or career. In the same way some people will identify with their job as a doctor or a teacher, and instead of it being something they just happen to be doing, it becomes an essential part of their self-image.

The activist is a specialist or an expert in social change. [...] Activism, like all expert roles, has its basis in the division of labour – it is a specialised separate task.<sup>145</sup>

Other commentators attacked the very predication of social movements on a culture of ‘radical expressivity’.<sup>146</sup> Here the critique of identity is seen as both central and insufficient, because the experience of the loss of identity in the crowd is predicated on the highly questionable identity and authority of the activist figure.<sup>147</sup> As witnessed in their satire of clothing-as-identity above, this was something that *Inventory* were careful to avoid.

After the encounter with the small groups and networks assembled at Info Centre and after J18, *Inventory* began to experiment with actions which would embody forms of collective non-identity as mobile bodies in the street. Three projects in particular exemplify a transition from the journal as

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145 Andrew X, ‘Give Up Activism’, Reclaim the Streets (Ed.), *Reflections on J18*, available, <http://www.infoshop.org/library/j18-reflections-rts1> [Accessed 17 July, 2017]. These critiques need to be understood in their proximity to the critiques of identity proffered by *Inventory*, Howard Slater and others participating at Info Centre. Bristol-based group and journal *Aufheben* strongly criticised the inability of this activist movement to confront the removal of its means of social reproduction – unemployment benefit, housing benefit, criminalisation of squatting and so on. This movement’s weaknesses amidst the new landscape of the UK plc. were soon to become patently clear in its sudden disappearance in the early-2000s.

146 “‘anticapitalism’ has predicated itself on the assumption of radical expressivity, the pivotal moment of any Reclaim The Streets event is the arrival of a smuggled in soundsystem. [...] for them cultural manifestations in the streets are manifestations of resistance to capitalism. But radical expressivity is only a final layer of varnish on a product that has had a long trip down a conveyor belt, why should this last process of many be valued so highly? To advocate an anticapitalist culture in the belief that it can be ‘spread’ and will eventually overthrow capital is a confusion of cultural content for productive form; anti-capitalism is a fragment of pop culture and functions as such, it cannot escape its confines, even down to the repetitious and exclusive nature of its events.’ Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism*, <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/monsieur-dupont-nihilist-communism> [Accessed 24/06/2013]. Further criticisms of J18 and the general tendencies explored by Reclaim the Streets-style activism can be found in *Reflections on J18*, op. cit.

147 This is not to suggest that the tactics developed by RTS under the spell of the rave movement haven’t continued to be used elsewhere to great effect. The following pair of articles reflect an interesting struggle over the forms of authenticity attributed to music in a recent protest situation: Paul Mason, ‘The Dubstep Rebellion’, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2010/12/9122010\\_dubstep\\_rebellion\\_-\\_br.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2010/12/9122010_dubstep_rebellion_-_br.html) [Accessed 03/11/2016], Dan Hancox, ‘This is our Riot Pow’, <http://dan-hancox.blogspot.de/2010/12/this-is-our-riot-pow.html>. The Deteritorial Support Group’s text, ‘All the Memes of Production’ reflect on some interesting problems for the transformation of a wayward cultural movement into a political movement, <http://libcom.org/library/all-memes-production-deteritorial-support-group> [Accessed 03/11/2016]



site of sociological research and sociological speculation, to the street as a site for experimentation with ‘general effervescences’ or, as *Inventory* put it, ‘dark effervescent energies’: new collective, social and physical formations.<sup>148</sup> In these endeavours they did not escape, but rather exacerbated problems, wherein a politics of ‘radical expressivity’; forms mimetic of capital’s flexibilising relation to labour; and a questionable ‘life philosophy’ derived from Nietzsche and Simmel, structured their anti-capitalism.<sup>149</sup>

## Smash This Puny Existence

*Smash This Puny Existence* was developed by *Inventory* immediately following the ‘Wall Newspapers’ installation at Info Centre. The project extended the idea of the journal as an open and collective form – a bridge between publishing and the street – by attempting to plaster two entire London and Glasgow streets with collaged text and images. With the assistance of designers, SecMoCo, *Inventory* produced broadsheet-format poster collages of text and image drawn from their writings, slogans and material published in the journal. Initiated by *Inventory* in collaboration with arts publisher and commissioning agency Book Works in 1999, the project took the form of a ‘public newspaper’ pasted up in each city for a single day.<sup>150</sup>

The London action took place on Hanway Street, a small alley traversing a right angle between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. The action took place the same day as, and in proximity to a ‘post-media flea-market’, Expo-Destructo held on the 20 March 1999, a spin-off from the Next Five Minutes conference in Amsterdam which brought together media and political activists with a specific focus on the relation between ‘the street and the net’.<sup>151</sup> At each entrance to Hanway Street

148 ‘General effervescence’ is Émile Durkheim’s phrase. Chris Schilling and Philip A. Mellor offer the following summary of Durkheim’s concept, ‘In considering the “general effervescence” that characterises particularly creative and revolutionary epochs, periods where there is a manifest revitalisation of society, he observes that the general stimulation of energies produced both sublime and savage moments, superhuman heroism and bloody barbarism, as ordinary individuals became transformed into new, more extreme beings (Durkheim 1912: 213). This implicitly acknowledges some of the potentially dangerous psychological outcomes of effervescences. Nevertheless, along with this transformation of individuals, effervescent actions transformed a range of profane phenomena into sacred things that strengthened revolutionary society.’ Chris Schilling and Philip A. Mellor, *The Sociological Ambition: Elementary Forms of Social and Moral Life*. London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2001, p.44.

149 These are important discussions I shall return to in the conclusions to this chapter; further we shall see how in *Inventory*’s urban studies these problems resurface and finally in the concluding remarks to this study I shall assess some far-reaching consequences of these positions.

150 *Inventory*, *Smash This Puny Existence*, (1999), <https://www.bookworks.org.uk/node/1560> [Accessed 02/12/2018]

151 Reclaim the Streets were one of many activist groups represented. Expo-Destructo: post-media pressure was a one day event held on 20 March 1999 in London combining a series of talks to celebrate the launch of a new book ‘*README! ascii culture and the revenge of knowledge*’, and a public gathering of media activists, webzines, artists working in electronic media, troublemakers and plenty others: a ‘post-media flea-market’, see

members or friends of the group held ‘Golf Sale’ signs – posing as ‘[h]uman Sign[s]’: ‘fashioned from skin, blood and bone’<sup>152</sup> – directing passers-by into the street to ‘smash this puny existence’ by engaging with *Inventory*’s collages. The attempt to directly intervene within a dense commercial and pedestrian thoroughfare was messy and chaotic.<sup>153</sup> The ripped and torn partially legible layered ‘midden’ remaining on the wall by the end of the day did not displease the group.<sup>154</sup> In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin writes ‘[the flâneur] takes the concept of being-for-sale itself for a walk. Just as the department store is his last haunt, so his last incarnation is as sandwichman’.<sup>155</sup> The installation courted amused, angry and confused, that is *active*, reactions from its audience of passers-by. This project, and its association with the prevalence for printed ephemera at Info Centre, seem to embody most directly to Benjamin’s affirmation of minor and fugacious literary forms.

Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book – in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards.<sup>156</sup>

At Info Centre, I contend, the journal found its ‘active communities’. However, the prospect of ‘strict alternation between action and writing’ and perhaps renewed confidence drawn from the cycle of protests and from the milieu developing around Info Centre, compelled it again to the streets. From a lexical perspective the phrases, themes and imagery of the journal had escaped their paper support and dissolved themselves into the urban fabric, its discourse had become aggregated with heterogeneous material forming a polysemous meshwork.<sup>157</sup> ‘The inventory of the streets is inexhaustible’, became briefly feasible as a factual statement about the fate of *Inventory*’s printed matter.<sup>158</sup> Though the interaction with the street was far from ideal – ‘alternation between action and writing’ being not necessarily a relationship of

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<http://bak.spc.org/iod/destructo/> [Accessed 03/10/2017]

152 ‘Today, this medium, rather than purely operating through the printed page, the moving image or some other technology, is fashioned from skin, blood and bone. The word is made flesh, yet the voice is silenced.’ Adam Scrivener, ‘Human Sign’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.49-50.

153 *Inventory*’s posters were often ripped down as fast as they could be put up and at a few points in the day rival fly-poster gangs, who claimed exclusive rights over such illicit activity, visited threats upon members of the group.

154 Nor would it admirers of the French avant-garde tradition of *affiche lacérées* (collages made from posters torn from advertising hoardings).

155 Walter Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, p.562 quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, ‘The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering’, in Beatrice Hanssen (Ed.), *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*. London; New York: Continuum, 2006, pp.33–65, p.39.

156 *One-Way Street*, op. cit., p.45.

157 And not for the first time, an early editorial, ‘Fierce Sociology’ was accompanied by an image of two flyers depicting the cover of the journal plastered on a wall weather worn and deteriorating. *Inventory*, ‘Fierce Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8.

158 Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, p.58, quoted in *Inventory*, ‘For a Sociology’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995.

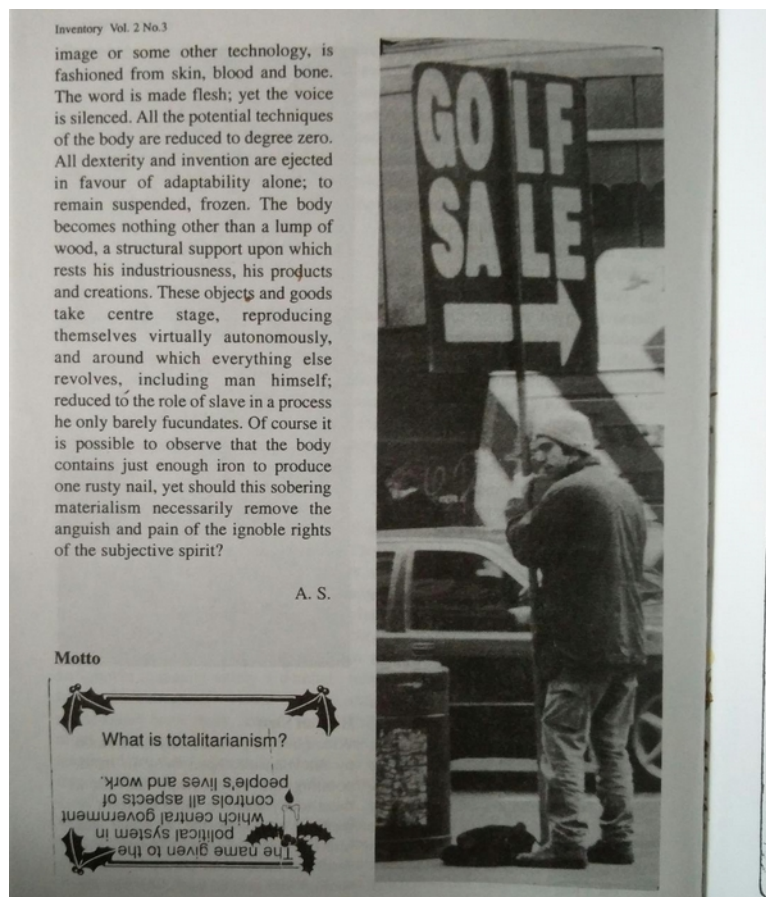
equanimity – the prominent reproduction and display of ‘found texts’ which had been sourced from the streets and this generalised slippage of authorial, publisher and publishing responsibility, within a context in which they were censored, made unreadable at the moment of being made public also played through the work. *Smash This Puny Existence* as an attempt to embody *Inventory*’s concerns with the immediacy and contingency of the act of publication probably came closest to meeting the challenge to dissolve *Inventory* into the crowded and urgent dynamism, including both criminal and competing commercial interests, of the street.



Image: Oxford Street, 1999. Nick Norton personal collection



Fig. 3:1. L'homme-sandwich. (*Miroir du Monde*, nr. 316, 21 March 1936, p.45)

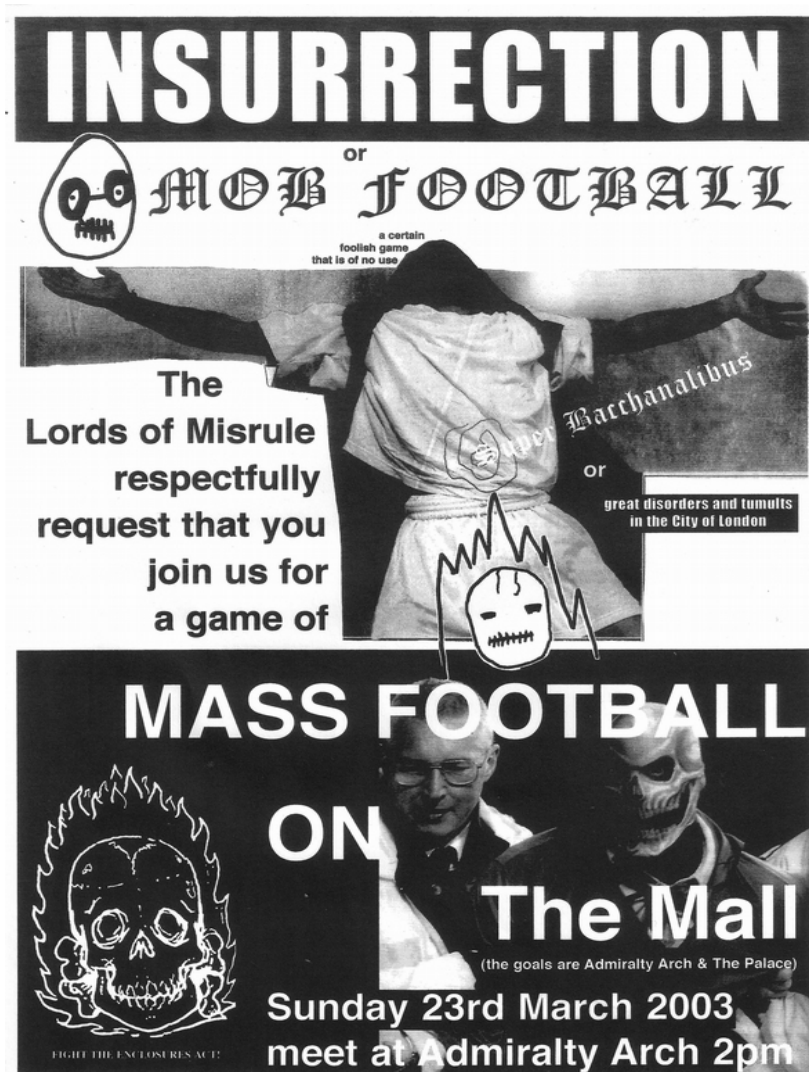


Images: (above) 'L'homme-sandwich' (sandwichman), 1936. From Hanssen (Ed.), *Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, 2006. (below) Adam Scrivener, 'Human Sign', Glossary, *Inventory*, 'Human Sign', *Inventory*, Vol.3No.1 1998, p.50.





Image: (above) Inventory, *Smash This Puny Existence*, Glasgow, 1999 (below) Image: Inventory, Poster for Mass Football on the Mall, 23 March 2003



## Mass Football on the Mall

The figure of Acéphale was reinterpreted by *Inventory* as a poster – the image of a footballer pulling his shirt over his head during a match celebration – for an event which instigated a game of mass football in front of Buckingham Palace using a ball fashioned to resemble a human skull. The game of ‘mass football’, held on 23 March 2003, coincided both with a group exhibition at the ICA and two days of massive protests in London and other cities in response to the commencement of the second Gulf War with the invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003.<sup>159</sup> These protests took place against the backdrop of a sequence of ‘leaderless’ protests in London, prior to and continuing after J18, which involved instances of mass trespass, rioting, violence against property and even ‘proletarian shopping’.<sup>160</sup> The stunt invoked the past republican insurrections of Britain and France, both the decapitation of Charles I in 1649 (which took place nearby at the Banqueting House on Whitehall) and the decapitation of French nobles, including Louis XVI, during the French revolution of 1789, and the tradition in the UK of mob football as a catalyst of social protest.<sup>161</sup> The performance also drew on the AAA’s experiments with ‘3-sided football’.<sup>162</sup> The fusion of historical moments, popular traditions and myths intervened into a present charged with political energies connected with related interventions into demonstrations and international protests at the time. A late text (2003) prepared under the pseudonym Kingsland Passage by *Inventory* editors, ‘The Last Days of

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159 See ‘March 22–23, 2003’ in ‘Protests against the Iraq War’,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests\\_against\\_the\\_Iraq\\_War#March\\_22.E2.80.9323.2C\\_2003](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_against_the_Iraq_War#March_22.E2.80.9323.2C_2003)

160 Our Mayday, ‘History of Mayday’, from [Ourmayday.org.uk](http://ourmayday.org.uk), April 2002, available,

<http://www.urban75.org/mayday02/history.html> [Accessed 14 July, 2017] provides an approximate history of this sequence from the 1999 Carnival Against Capital through to successive Mayday’s in London.

161 One of Bataille’s proposals for Contre-Attaque had involved the restaging the execution of Louis XVI in the early days of the Popular Front at the Place de la Concorde on 21 January 1936 and this Bataille proposed as an annual celebration for observation by Acéphale. Cf. Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Leiris, Alastair Brochie, Natasha Lehrer, John Harman, Meyer Barash, and André Masson, *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology*, Ed. Marina Galletti, London: Atlas press, 2017, p.20, p.84 and p.119. In 1699, ‘an estimated 1,100 rioters attacked drainage works and enclosures in Deeping Level, just north of Peterborough’, ‘Under Colour & pretence of Foot ball playing’. Heather Falvey, ‘Custom, resistance and politics: local experiences of improvement in early modern England’, PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2007, pp. 356-7. See also, James Walvin, *The People’s Game: The History of Football Revisited*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1994. Walvin indicates several further examples of 18th anti-enclosure riots orchestrated under the guise of football games. Actual events where a sovereign’s head was used are hard to confirm, but much local myth and folklore persist along these lines in the UK, for example in Winchelsea. where players annually try to capture an object known as ‘The Frenchman’s Head’, see:

<http://www.winchelsea.net/community/game.htm> [Accessed 14 July, 2017]; and here a witness report during the years leading up to the civil war (1642) describes a crowd playing with the head of an executed Catholic priest:

<http://historyweird.com/1642-mob-football-catholic-priest-head/> [Accessed 14 July, 2017]

162 A part of their Space 1999 festival. The AAA claimed Asger Jorn was the first person to propose three-sided football as a way of conveying his concept of ‘triolectics’. Richard Essex (LPA), ‘Three-sided football offers unique problems. How do you keep your team together? What is your identity? The very boundaries of what a team is can loosen; we can discover new ways of organisation.’ Association of Autonomous Astronauts, ‘Warm-up for the Intergalactic 3-sided Football Final’, *Space 1999*, No.7, 21 June, 1999.



London', combines historically distinct moments of revolt in the city with what could pass as a first-hand experience of J18 in an eschatological collage.

In Bread Street, during the last days, I saw the King's decapitated head, summoned from beneath the asphalt. I saw him! In the shaft cut from the sickly dark matter. He is there! Like the others. Their bones trampled upon by pinstriped dullards that cannot begin to conceive of the consequences, of what we have become. Because, long ago, we killed the King, we demolished the state, broke the chain of sovereignty and removed the head of reason. We possessed the acephalous sovereignty, the communal power and then let it slip from our grasp.<sup>163</sup>

The image of Acéphale loomed large in *Inventory*'s vocabulary, in written contributions and in numerous projects by those who made the journal.<sup>164</sup> Use of the image emphasised the centrality of humour to the Bataillean project of restoring sovereignty to modern subjects. Humour deposes every authority, especially the self.<sup>165</sup> Under the aegis of Acéphale Bataille had challenged forms of monocephalism: the god-head dictators Stalin and Hitler, the authority of a Christian God, and the little fascist within – the individual ego.<sup>166</sup> *Inventory*'s stunt staged what, according to Michael Richardson, Contre-Attaque had sought through actions: 'a contagious myth by which the death of the sovereign would be celebrated as the regenerative act of the transformation of society.'<sup>167</sup> The experience of mass public gatherings after Diana Princess of Wales' death 31 August 1997 informed *Inventory*'s attempt to reopen a public wound around taboo questions of the British public, the relationship to its Monarchs and its complex sovereignty, or lack of it.<sup>168</sup>

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163 Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London', *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.72-73, pp.72-73.

164 Cf. Nick Norton, 'Bring Me the Head of Georges Bataille', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997; Howard Slater, 'New Acéphale', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997; Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London' *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003.

165 See for example Adam Scrivener, 'Laughter', op. cit. and 'Inventory Questionnaire' in *Indent*, op. cit., p.37.

166 'The only society full of life and force, the only free society, is the bi- or poly- cephalic society that gives the fundamental antagonisms of life a constant explosive outlet, but one limited to the richest forms [...] the very principle of the head is the reduction to unity, the *reduction* of the world to God.' Georges Bataille, 'Propositions', *Visions of Excess*, op. cit., p.199.

167 Georges Bataille and Michael Richardson, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* London; New York: Verso, 1994, p.12.

168 This event and its significance for the journal is discussed in Chapter 2. Of three contributions addressing this event, only two were by regular *Inventory* contributors, Damian Abbott's glossary entry 'Paparazzi Photograph' appearing in the issue immediately following the event, Simon Neville and Julian Walker's thoughtful essays addressing both the mood of the crowd and the geopolitical significance of the event of Diana's death appeared two issues subsequently. Julian Walker's was a celebrated 'coincidence', a blind submission which happened to coincide with the group's focus on this event. Simon Neville, 'Let Her Sons Weep', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.42-45; Julian Walker, 'Grave Goods and Teddy Bear Theives', *Ibid.*, pp.81-96 and Damian Abbott, 'Paparazzi Photograph', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.34-35.



Images: (above) Flyer invitation for *Coagulum*, 15 December, 2000 (below) *Coagulum* in HMV Oxford Street, 15 December, 2000

## Coagulum

In relation to emerging discourses circulating around these protest movements of the ‘multitude’ (Negri & Hardt); the fight against ‘new enclosures’ (*Midnight Notes*) and the tactics developed by the Tute Bianche in Italy (published by Infopool), *Inventory* developed a ludic street action named Coagulum involving any number of participants forming a clot, or rugby scrum, in a site of commerce, jamming the commercial flows of privatised space.<sup>169</sup> A first version was staged on the 13 May 2000 in a shopping centre in Kingston, in the context of the exhibition ‘Working Title’ held at the Stanley Picker Gallery. The action invited participants to meet at a shopping centre and form an obstruction in ‘the form of the rugby scrum although adapted to create a circular formation of bodies rather than the, head to head, conflictual form as it is in the game. A physical as well as symbolic affirmation of collectivity, unity and headlessness.’<sup>170</sup> Whilst directed with a clear intent: ‘to clog, to obstruct the flow of the main thoroughfare of a shopping centre’, its execution defied direction, since once in the scrum no authoritative instruction could be given.<sup>171</sup> Though conversations, laughter and other non-verbal communication, took place inside the scrum, the view of knees, other squashed faces and the floor permitted little other than essential coordination between participants.<sup>172</sup> Thus, whilst concentrating energy in a novel formation, the experiment ‘produce[d] nothing but its own energy – which it expends uselessly’<sup>173</sup> *Inventory* understood the experiment as a kind of strike: ‘[i]n a manner similar to that of a strike, our coagulum was a refusal of our role, of our work, as consumers.’<sup>174</sup> The obstruction was repeated on Oxford Street in the busy Christmas shopping period of December 2000 inside a number of malls and shops. The outcome was often surprising, perhaps because still unresolved theoretically or practically. It must be remembered that *Coagulum*, like other ludic experiments by *Inventory*, occurred in proximity to sites of consumption but also protests, each event ambiguously sought both the ‘contagion’ by unpredictable mass action and the consumption of spectators used to experiencing spectacular art.<sup>175</sup>

*Coagulum (Oxford Street)* (2001), documents a proto-flash-mob-like public intervention

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169 See New Enclosures, *Midnight Notes*, No.10, 1990, available, <https://midnightnotes.memoryoftheworld.org/> [Accessed 20 February, 2019]; Tute Bianche, ‘The Practical Side of Myth Making (in Catastrophic Times)’, *Infopool* No.7, 2003 and Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard: Harvard College, 2000.

170 *Inventory*, ‘Coagulum’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.4-12, p.5.

171 *Ibid.*

172 Participant observation by the author December 2000.

173 *Coagulum*, *op. cit.*, p.7

174 *Ibid.*

175 This is particularly the case with *Coagulum* and *Mass Football*, since each were actions that were documented and then represented as self-sufficient video art works at various exhibitions at the Approach gallery and elsewhere, cf. J.J. Charlesworth, ‘Requiem for the Empty Quarter’, *Art Monthly*, No.254, March 2002.

organized by Inventory in the middle of a packed Central London record store. About ten people come together to form a rugby scrum-like arrangement on the busy shop floor. The pestiferous mass begins to turn, soon spinning wildly as security guards wrestle hopelessly with the flailing limbs at its peripheries and onlookers stare on, agog.<sup>176</sup>

Remarkable in the reviewer's account is the clarity with which it resolves *Coagulum* into a spectacle experienced only from the outside. This is a particular problematic quality of both *Coagulum* and *Mass Football on the Mall* since both could generate two completely distinct experiences, that of a participant and that of a viewer experiencing the documentation of the event.<sup>177</sup> The opposing and exclusive view is given by its participants who were generally not afforded a very good view and were given to understand it as a 'rare, intense experience of an elated and elemental kind', not as an object produced at a distance.<sup>178</sup> This aspect, reflected upon by *Inventory* in their text as the 'open' and 'closed' aspects of the *Coagulum* as a crowd – open in the sense of its directionlessness, closed in the sense of prohibitive and without dependency on 'continued growth' – lends us some insight into the complex dynamics of play whereby a field of (not necessarily competitive) intensity is produced between players at distance from onlookers.<sup>179</sup> Later instantiations of this action merged and became indistinguishable from the, then resurgent, protest culture which, like Reclaim the Streets' actions, had begun use both play and direct action to block similar sites of commerce.<sup>180</sup> The sequence of protests building up to, but steeply declining directly after, September 2001, valued play as an end in itself. However, problematically, the deployment of play as a *tactic* was often woefully instrumental – to block a road, to distract police or other security forces and so on. *Inventory*, describing *Coagulum* as 'a movement that was not adversarial, but at once directionless and in every direction', not only nod to the multi-directionality invoked by both Info Centre and J18 and its interaction with practical experiment, but insist on its qualities as a self-conscious exploration of resistant biologisation from below, celebrating, rather than attainment of political goals, the coagulum's formation of 'a compound being' a 'minority, a

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176 Paul Pieroni, 'Inventory Rob Tufnell, London, UK Issue , September 2014'. *Frieze*, no. 165 (September 2014). <http://frieze.com/issue/review/inventory/> [Accessed, 2 March, 2017].

177 My contention is that whilst in the event experience and participation are indivisible, the documentation/artwork side of these actions separated, removed and occulted the participant's experience.

178 'Coagulum', op. cit, p.10.

179 *Inventory* place this in relation to Elias Canetti's theory of open and closed crowds, Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, (Ed.) Carol Stewart, London: Penguin Books, 1979, quoted in Ibid.

180 Mayday 2000 saw skirmishes and mini-riots throughout the commercial centre of London, Soho, Oxford Street and Picadilly Circus. Mayday 2001 was themed 'Mayday Monopoly', <http://libcom.org/library/mayday-2001> [Accessed 2 March, 2017] all shops on Oxford Street were boarded up. An artwork by Jakob Jakobsen, contributor to *Inventory*, publisher of Infopool and organiser of project space Info Centre, was directly inspired by Mayday 2001, 'They Don't Want Our Desires Today', 2001 and published in *Mute*.

micro community'.<sup>181</sup> This 'non-discursive' compound or coagulum was elsewhere used by the group to refer to the practice of producing the journal and the kinds of writing and experience it sought to engender.<sup>182</sup> Therefore, Coagulum as a symbol develops Acéphale, forming not a single individual who has lost his head in the face of the death of god, but a human community of the headless, entering into self-organisation as a potential siege machine capable of social action. Their reflections, in 'Coagulum', discuss the action on the terms of 'fierce sociology' to make clear that the non-commercial 'product' or outcome (of the method and the action) was exactly this micro community directed towards a process 'whereby sociality begins to assert itself'.<sup>183</sup>

In their report on 'Coagulum', *Inventory* reflect critically on Roger Caillois' theory of play.<sup>184</sup> Caillois' theory lacks a dynamic account of play and modernity. In distinction *Inventory* note that 'play [...] has penetrated the organisation of life' and the commercialisation of play 'is bounded within spatial and temporal limits and by rules either real or imaginary'.<sup>185</sup> They propose that since, for Caillois, in play, 'the sentiment of "as if" replaces and performs the function of rules'.<sup>186</sup> Coagulum could transgress 'to transform the sentiment into a reality'.<sup>187</sup> For Caillois, play becomes the law. For *Inventory* play erupts back into the space of heteronomy and breaks regulation, including the categories made to contain it. Since play itself is dynamic and modernisation commits to a form of 'acceleration' in which both technological redundancy and rapid redistribution of technology outside of immediately productive sectors is accelerated.<sup>188</sup> I contend that this

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181 Quotations from 'Coagulum', op. cit, p.10. The biological metaphor of the coagula or clot, is explored at greater length in the text cited above, and the theme of biologisation and revolt is explored in depth and with great originality in the same issue in an essay by *Inventory* editor Damian Abbott, 'Extensive Bodies', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.117-131.

182 For 'non-discursive', see 'New Acéphale', op. cit., p.75. 'Naturally, this journal and its contributors have actively pursued the possibilities inherent in the essay as a literary form, a rant or as an analytical or interpretive tool. The essay as a technique of contaminated analysis, a way of examining phenomena in close-up – with subjective and objective elements deliberately coagulated.' *Inventory*, 'We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, p.6.

pp.5-13.

183 'Coagulum', op. cit, p.10.

184 Caillois' account turns on the conception that the objects played with are de-sacrilized and outmoded. Yet, he questions with regard to childrens' play with instruments of warfare. As Caillois describes, children play equally with the outmoded instruments of war: bows and arrows, slingshots etc. but also tanks, planes, drones.

185 'Coagulum', op. cit, quotations respectively from p.5 and p.6.

186 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001, quoted in *Ibid.*, p.6.

187 'Coagulum', op. cit, p.6.

188 It offers that whilst computer technology has become endemic to most sectors of life, the intensification of gaming (witnessed for example in its overtaking film as revenue streams) with technology represents a kind of return of the repressed. War games themselves have been re-introduced into military practice as therapy for returning shocked soldiers, whilst games themselves increasingly enshrine the logic of work within them (e.g. Minecraft), this is a form of work as outmoded, as play. Yet, further study of these phenomenon indicates a reciprocal dynamic of play becoming work and work devolving into play. We might bemoan the development of exploitative modes of wage labour accompanying this intensification of gaming, or computer technologies dependence on extractive industries. Peter Suderman, 'Young Men Are Playing Video Games Instead of Getting Jobs. That's OK. (For Now.)' July 2017, <http://reason.com/archives/2017/06/13/young-men-are-playing-video-ga> [Accessed, 17 July, 2017]

configuration of play and work is symptomatic of a breakdown of the wage relation as the central binding form of capitalist accumulation, which has far-reaching and complex repercussions for class composition and, I would argue, potentially fatal implications for capitalism as a historical form.



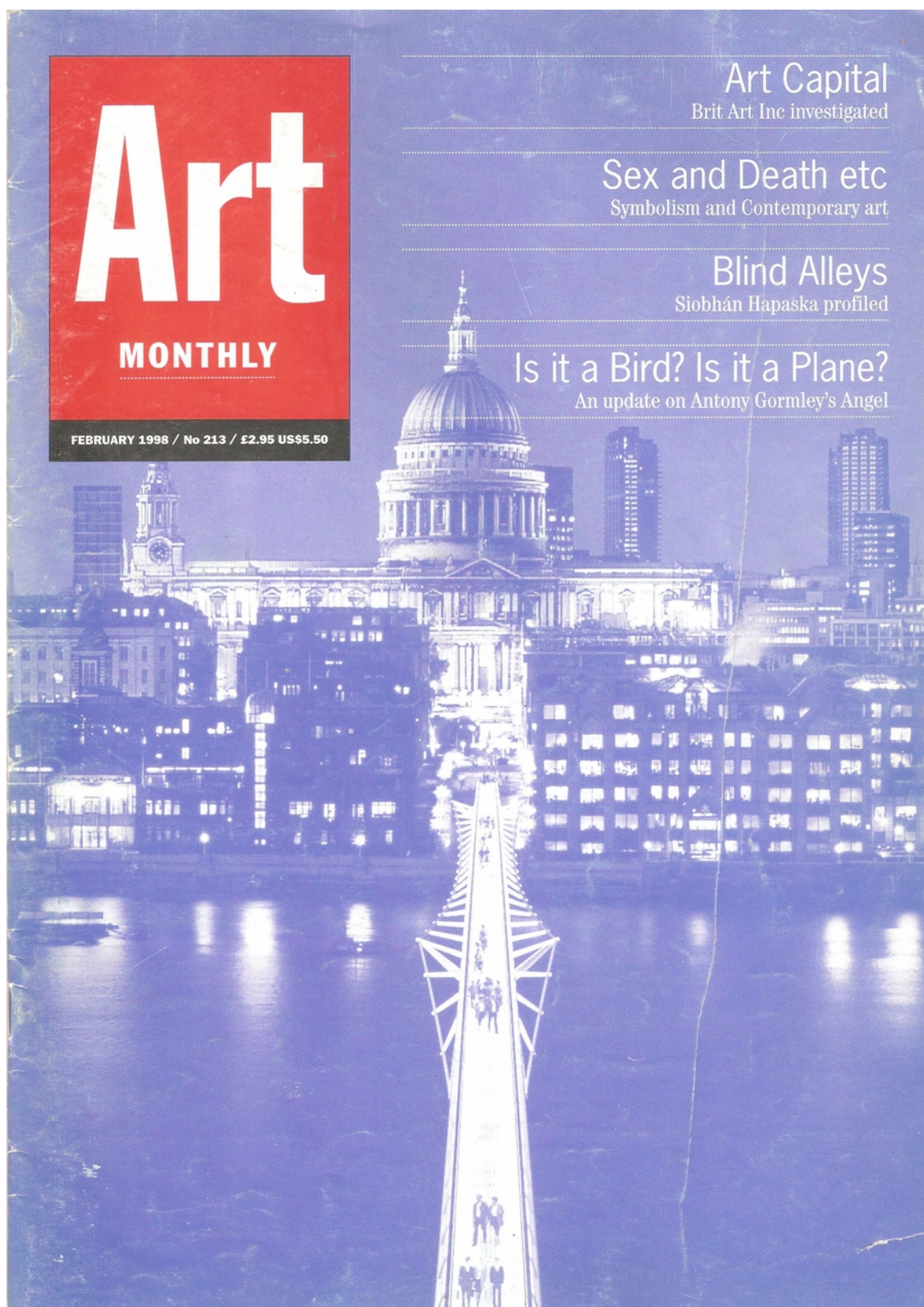


Image: Cover of *Art Monthly*, No.213, February 1998



## Century City

Against these brief moments of ‘sociality asserting itself’ symptoms of a programme of ‘cultural retrenchment’ could be detected in the ‘civic nationalism’ of Century City, the inaugural major exhibition with which the Tate Modern opened.<sup>189</sup> Presenting a survey of ‘Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis’ covering the cities of Mumbai, Lagos, Moscow, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Vienna, the Tate implicitly framed London as the city in which global cultural hegemony, or at least ‘cool’, resided at that present epoch, 1990-2001. Proposing the ‘city is the medium of the modern’ and claiming to ‘map’ the ‘alchemical processes that transform raw aspiration into cultural phenomena’ the exhibition attempted to selectively scoop up and institutionalise elements of the critical urbanism of ‘self-institutional’ initiatives I have discussed in the context of Info Centre.<sup>190</sup> The exhibition’s narrative of the transition from the modern to the post-industrial city aligns ‘cultural production and the invention of new economies’, reframing ‘artists, dancers and film-makers’ working amidst the chaos of neoliberal reform<sup>191</sup>, as ‘enterprising’, framing city-dwellers generally and artists in London specifically, as examples of ‘low-tech entrepreneurship’.<sup>192</sup> Century City then can be understood as the crowning establishment of what Anthony Davies, studying the emergence of new levels of private/public cooperation around culture of which the Tate Bankside was to be paradigmatic, termed ‘Art Capital’.<sup>193</sup> This ‘surge to merge’ is characterised as a contemporary zeitgeist:

the first strand of this surge to merge we can see cultural, political and economic agendas converging in the promotion and global positioning of a City (with full support from the resident business community). This activity underpinned the rise of young British Art [...] in the second strand of the surge to merge we see companies forging closer economic and promotional links to contemporary art/culture. This activity was further compounded by corporate restructuring, cross sectoral alliances.<sup>194</sup>

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189 This the final phase in the periodisation developed by Davies above. Anthony Davies, ‘Basic Instinct: Trauma and Retrenchment 2000-4’, 9 February 2005, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/basic-instinct-trauma-and-retrenchment-2000-4> [Accessed 3 December 2018]

190 Iwona Blazwick, ‘Century City’, in Iwona Blazwick (Ed.), *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*. London: Tate Publishing, 2001, pp.8-15, p.8.

191 For example, the drastic restructuring following New York’s City’s 1972 bankruptcy.

192 Blazwick, *Ibid.* p.12 and p.14 respectively.

193 Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, ‘Art Capital’. *Art Monthly*, No.213 (February 1998).

194 Anthony Davies, ‘The Surge to Merge Culture with the Economy’, a talk given at Copenhagen Free University, 29th September 2001, reproduced as a pamphlet and available, <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/AD01.html> [Accessed, 20 January, 2017] The symbolic unification of London’s cultural sector with the City of London as a provider of financial services was explored in an earlier piece by Davies in collaboration with Simon Ford. Cf. ‘Art

*Inventory* and Infopool both found themselves included in the exhibition alongside art-critical paper vehicles such as *Bank* tabloid in a reading room display which borrowed elements from the informal info-space Info Centre had developed. In *Inventory*'s case however, a major work was also displayed in the London section of the exhibition, and this led to the acquisition of the work into the Tate's permanent collection.<sup>195</sup> For Info Centre the curation of a series of their pamphlets was not consensual. A part of the run of Infopool's series of occasional papers and pamphlets were collected and stapled together under a new cover and displayed without their authors' permission, 'more as an exhibit than as supportive material'.<sup>196</sup> The curated object was promptly removed from the gallery with bolt-cutters by Info Centre members and information about the action was published and circulated.<sup>197</sup> The Century City exhibition was the subject of a polemical and sardonic text by Matthew Arnatt published in *Inventory* which reflected on the London Art scene and its historicisation.<sup>198</sup> Though *Inventory* provided a platform for criticism of the Tate's 'jingoistic optimism', they approached their own inclusion *tactically*, participating in the exhibition whilst using the extraneous initiative of their journal to criticise it.<sup>199</sup> Century City represents a high-water mark for the attempted institutionalisation of *Inventory* and the scene they were a part, here represented by Infopool's enforced inclusion and performative exit.<sup>200</sup>

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Capital', op. cit., available, <http://infopool.antipool.org/artcap.htm> [Accessed 1 December, 2017]

195 *Inventory*, *Estate Map*, (1999), <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/inventory-estate-map-t07839> [Accessed 1 December, 2017]

196 Anon, 'Operation Re-appropriation: Infopool @ the Tate Modern 9.2.2001'.

197 Nicholas Thoburn's recent book contains a section on this action. *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, op. cit., pp.91-92.

198 Matthew Arnatt, 'Keanu Willats', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.86-91.

199 'Keanu Willats', op. cit., p.88.

200 *Inventory*'s art practice was included in Century City via the work entitled *Estate Map*, itself a derivation of two entries in the journal, the essay by Adam Scrivener on the Marquess Estate, and an eponymously-titled glossary entry. The work *Estate Map* was formed from the redundant estate map lifted from the site of the renovated and in-filled Marquess Estate. Though the material support for the work, the estate sign which was former property of Islington Council, was acquired with permission (at least of the builders contracted to demolish and rebuild parts of the estate) its suggestion both of theft of council property and vandalism remains a contentious aspect of its content and arguably the legal framework which surrounds its subsequent acquisition by the Tate.



Image: (left) Inventory, *Estate Map*, (1999) Installation view, *Ruin Lust*, Tate Britain, 2014 (right) Photograph of Infopool pamphlet reappropriated from the Tate, 2000

## Estate Map

According to *Inventory* editor Adam Scrivener, the artwork *Estate Map* was a ludic outcome of his research for his essay on the Marquess Estate, 'Open Yet Excluded'.<sup>201</sup> As with several other works by *Inventory* a relay between the journal and the work, as well as the journal and the street is produced. We can read the *Estate Map* two ways: as the literal and concrete instantiation of the glossary entry, or the glossary entry as a secondary documentation and verbatim reproduction of the inscription on the object. A third relay is established by the work's re-siting in the Tate as part of the Century City exhibition, a relay between the street and the gallery. Therefore, the work forces us to reckon with the linking two sites; Bankside Power Station redeveloped as Tate Modern and the Marquess Estate (council housing) redeveloped as the Marquess Estate (private housing and council housing). The *Estate Map* was a spatio-geographical index to the original Marquess Estate. Its relocation at the Tate Modern reposes it as a kind of non-site, in the lineage of Robert Smithson, which is further complexified by the redundancy of its indexical status after the changed layout of the site. By analogy with Smithson, the non-site of the *Estate Map* forms a 'logical two dimensional picture' of the Marquess Estate site and between the site of the Tate and the site of the Marquess 'exists a space of metaphoric significance'.<sup>202</sup> The 'metaphoric significance' of *Estate Map* at the Tate indicates an absence in the exhibition's ability to relate to the problems of poor housing and privatisation in London to its spun narrative of London's cultural splendour. Secondly the map brings into close dialogue the disorientation of the estate's inhabitants at the hands of its planners, the misfit with lived experience, and the disorientation staged by the exhibition itself as a potential map and representation of the city. In the context of an exhibition celebrating cities in general and 'London [as] one of the most important sites for the production of contemporary art, design and fashion in Europe.' the map indicates another territory which the exhibition's narrative chooses to obfuscate.<sup>203</sup> In this sense the map is an artefact of the ongoing colonial logic of the (national and local) state. *Estate Map*, in its mute self-evidence, therefore comprises a powerful antidote to the post-colonial framework of Century City where Lagos and Mumbai are presented as allies and complements to London, despite the latter being the former colonial administrative centre of the former two cities, within an exhibition which emphasises London's history of black artists and

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201 Adam Scrivener, 'Open Yet Excluded', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.78-91,

202 Robert Smithson, 'A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites', (1968), Smithson, Robert. *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, (Ed.) Nancy Holt. New York: New York University Press, 1979, p.364.

203 Emma Dexter, 'London 1990-2001', in Iwona Blazwick, (Ed.) *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis*, London: Tate Publishing, 2001, pp.70-93, p.72.

black fashion culture. In contradistinction to this colourful but flattening celebration of difference *Estate Map* offers a guide to the perpetuation of colonial modes of governance in an endogenous mode, inside London, while the exhibition of which it is a part celebrates the end (continuity via other means) of the exogenous colonial framework through associations with the independence and vivacity of post-colonial cities such as Lagos and Mumbai. In this light Century City can be read as highly strategic, confirming rather than critically questioning London's emerging preeminence as a pre- post- and neo-colonial centre of global finance. The presentation of London as prominent exemplar of multiculturalism, or cosmopolitanism, amidst these other cities, with Paris and Moscow firmly positioned in the past, articulated in relation to the decolonisation of Lagos and Mumbai as the passages from the recent past through which we arrive, firmly positions London in the temporal space of the contemporary, delineated by these presentations of recent past, present and future cities. I will reserve further thoughts on *Inventory*'s susceptibility and refusal of institutionalisation until the conclusion of this study.

## From Post-Media to the New Institutionalism

Through Howard Slater's theorisation of post-media as resistant 'to the monopoly over the means of expression' we might understand the Tate's appropriation of Info Centre's work as an, initially successful, reassertion of that monopoly. Whereby, Info Centre's Operation Reappropriation becomes a subsequent challenge to and exodus from it.

As Infopool saw it, the museum's interest in these pamphlets was exemplary of the 'valorisation of socialisation' – the commodification of social relations that seek to escape the commodity – that is common to contemporary cultural institutions, as they cast around for content and legitimacy.<sup>204</sup>

From the perspective of experimentations with self-institution, this kind of activity has to be seen under the glass ceiling (or vitrine) set by the state, or other larger institutional bodies, as describing the upper limit on the licence such communities might take.<sup>205</sup> For the groups and individuals assembled at Info Centre, as the 2000s begun in earnest, I believe they found themselves caught

204 Nicholas Thoburn, 'Curating the Activist Object: Murdered Object / Self-Institutional Pamphlet', Workshop held at the V&A Museum, London, 14 June, 2014.

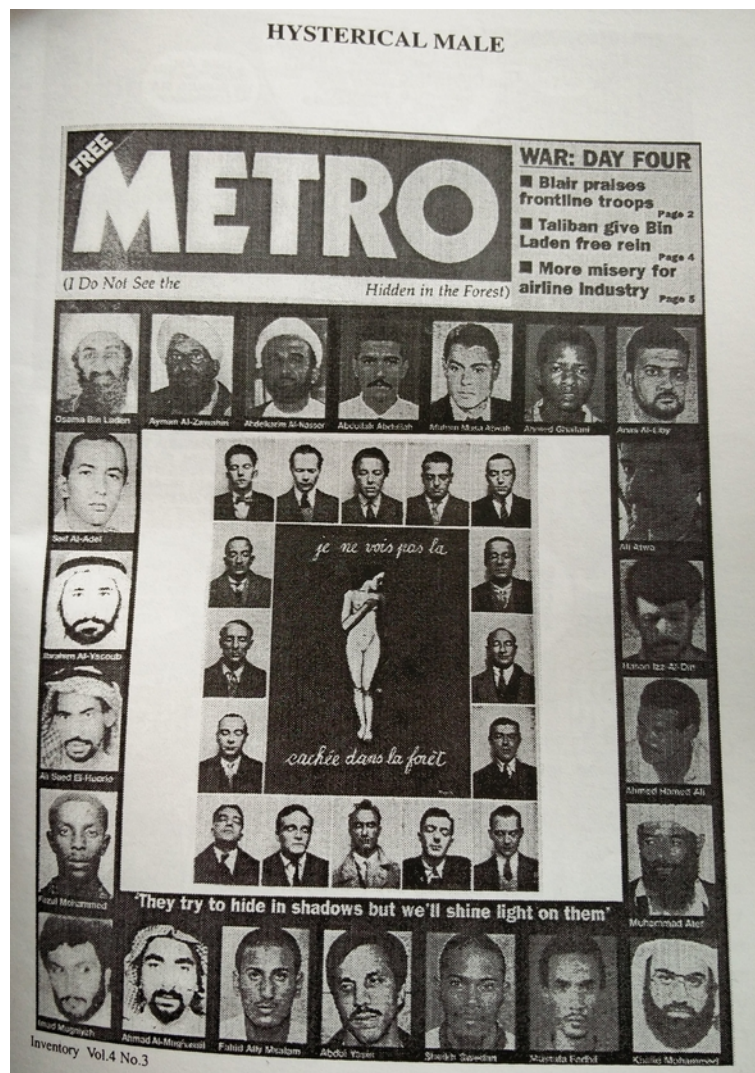
205 'The state is the guarantor, but not the creator, of relationships. It represents and unifies capital, it is neither capital's motor nor its centrepiece [...] the substance of the state resides not in institutional forms, but in its unifying function. The state ensures the tie which human beings cannot and dare not create among themselves, and creates a web of services which are both parasitic and real.' Gilles Dauvé, 'When Insurrections Die', *Endnotes* No.1, October, 2010, p.63.

between the end of 'dole autonomy', flux of 'post-media' and the emergence of a 'new institutionalism'. Neither the false promise of elective communities autonomous from the state nor the long march through its institutions appeared tenable. 'Tactical sovereignty', or 'self-institution', experimentations with outmoded or contingent apparatuses were then only a temporary means of extending laterally while vertical extension was impeded. At Info Centre (and through its subsequent manifestations) the dimension of production in and through everyday life was emphasised as a form of resistance to the perceived cooptation of everyday life in capitalist society. The dynamic of anti-institutional exodus and self-institutional creation conjured a fragile space in which to explore the everyday or local mediations which might modify and play with capital's categories, though in the face of the 'consolidation of existing power relations', this would always remain a tentative proposition.<sup>206</sup> As the 2000s rolled on, the break up of informal spaces such as Info Centre and Backspace, as well as the growing repression and 'retrenchment' distanced these groups from any potential revolutionary agent. Pro-revolutionary statements increasingly became ironic self-critique, the possible combination out of which revolutionary change might come remained 'vague', fleetingly 'sovereign' and indeterminate.

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206 'There is No Alternative: The Future is [Self-]Organised' - Part 2, op. cit.





Images: (Left) Cover of *La Revolution Surrealiste*, No.1 December 1924. Germaine Berton was a French anarchist who assassinated Marius Plateau, a Royalist politician aligned with the extreme-right wing group Action Francaise, on January 23rd, 1923. The inscription reads: 'Woman is the being who projects the greatest shadow or light in one's dreams' (Right) Nick Norton, collage published in the article 'Hysterical Male', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3, 2002, pp.123-127, p.123.



## Retrenchment and the War on Terror

The renewed ferocity of state repression established under the ‘war on terror’ and the intensification of struggles, driven by privatisation and financialisation, over social space which took hold from the 2000s onwards, elicited clearer political positioning by *Inventory*:

Ultimately, what matters is that all creative endeavour should act as a catalyst, in any way possible, with any means available, providing small contributions to a wider urge and movement for social change. A movement that will eventually bring about a re-evaluation of values whereby creativity and life are one – where labour, class divisions and all the other classificatory machinery of contemporary capitalism that makes slaves of us all are overturned in permanent revolution.<sup>207</sup>

This late statement seemed to register the problems inherent in remaining small and ‘sovereign’, and this concurred with statements by those close to Info Centre, which also seem to gesture towards and advocate for a much wider movement.<sup>208</sup> Such tentative and fragile formations would appear to pale in significance when held up to the dramatic apocalypticism of 11 September 2001 and the ‘war on terror’ it unleashed, adopting small cell-like anonymous structures and ‘moving in many directions at once’ would now draw a much more serious response from state agencies. In the review of *Inventory*’s exhibition ‘Requiem for the Empty Quarter’, in the airborne attacks on America, J.J. Charlesworth registered both the loss of initiative on behalf of protesters as well as the evidence of Western capital’s weakness.<sup>209</sup>

Clarifying as it was, the energy and opportunities for ‘effective progressive politics’ swiftly attenuated. The very mode of organising of both the activists of the anti-globalisation movement and the ‘post-media operators’ fell foul of the aggressive redefinition of state interests: augmentation of police powers, proliferating legislation, surveillance, welfare retrenchment and general suspicion of ‘radical networks’ under the war on terror. Though *Inventory* persisted in this

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207 ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, op. cit., p.9.

208 ‘Can those in the cultural and educational sector situate notions of collectivity and communism beyond the specialisation that capitalist production continues to impose? Can these struggles be connected, widened? Can they contribute to post-capitalist, de-specialised spaces, which enable cultural production and engagement in the wildest sense?’ Anthony Davies, Stephan Dilleuth, Jakob Jakobsen, ‘There is No Alternative: The Future is [Self-]Organised’ - Part 2, available, <http://colouringinculture.org/blog/2015/10/16/there-is-no-alternative-the-future-is-self-organised2-texts-for-artists-opposing-neoliberalism-pt1> [Accessed 17 July, 2017], n.p.

209 ‘Since September 11th, with the protest agenda losing momentum and coherence now that Western Capital appears more under siege than all-powerful, it is now critical that a clear distinction be made between the agenda and practice of an effective progressive politics, and the content and form of a new progressive culture. It’s true that life is not enough, but then life can be more than we imagine, and the point is, as always, to change it.’ J.J. Charlesworth, ‘Requiem for the Empty Quarter’, *Art Monthly*, No.254, March 2002.

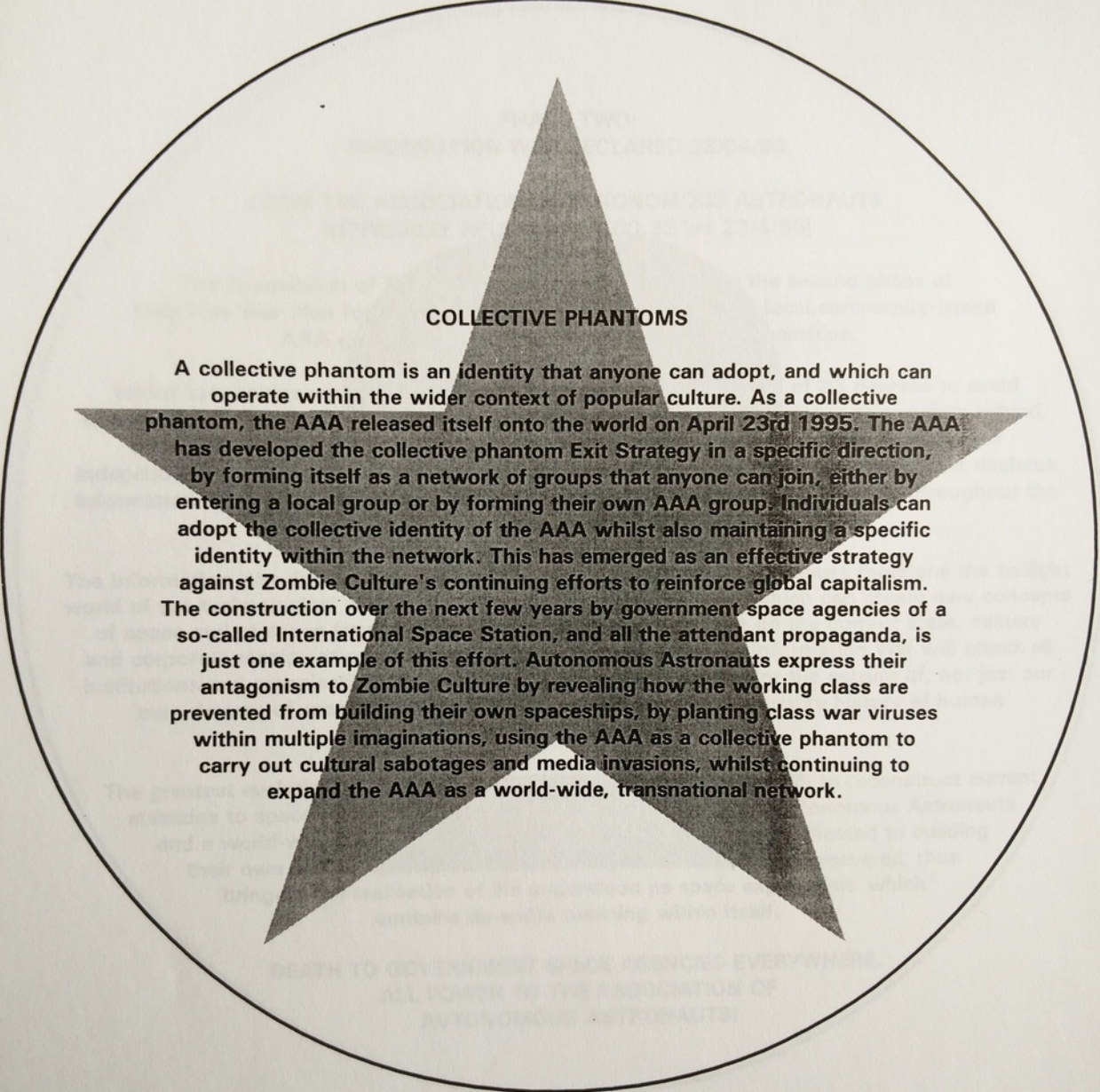
period and made attempts to address these new conditions, the general convergence around Info Centre had, after the ‘starburst’ moment, followed a trajectory of dispersal. Whilst energies around Infopool and CFU petered out towards 2003, *Inventory*’s combination of sociological method with the comparatively solid organ of the journal appeared initially to retain critical ground.<sup>210</sup> ‘A Collection Of Emails Around 11/9/01’ by evoL PsychogeogrAphix documents the mixed responses of anger, confusion and paranoia written by personal correspondents and subscribers to activist mailing lists to the author in the wake of 11 September 2001.<sup>211</sup> Published adjacently in the same issue, Nick Norton’s playful collage ‘Hysterical Male’ persists in media critical and irreverent mode drawing an aleatory parallel between surrealist publishing formats and an example of a London tabloid’s ‘War on Terror’ coverage.<sup>212</sup> But if this image suggests comparison between surrealists and terror suspects was both plausible and ridiculous the viability of surrealist or avant-garde models of cultural practice in the emerging media environment it framed were not reflected upon seriously in either the pages of *Inventory* or elsewhere.

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210 This is a moot point if evaluation is based on *Inventory* journal’s publishing frequency of 9 issues between 1995–2000 and only 6 issues between 2000–2005. Nonetheless the intensity of exhibitions, external publications and actions like those discussed in this section must be considered somewhere energy otherwise spent on the journal might have dissipated.

211 evoL PsychogeogrAphix, ‘A Collection Of Emails Around 11/9/01’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.98-122.

212 Nick Norton, ‘Hysterical Male’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.3, 2002, pp.123-127.



### COLLECTIVE PHANTOMS

A collective phantom is an identity that anyone can adopt, and which can operate within the wider context of popular culture. As a collective phantom, the AAA released itself onto the world on April 23rd 1995. The AAA has developed the collective phantom Exit Strategy in a specific direction, by forming itself as a network of groups that anyone can join, either by entering a local group or by forming their own AAA group. Individuals can adopt the collective identity of the AAA whilst also maintaining a specific identity within the network. This has emerged as an effective strategy against Zombie Culture's continuing efforts to reinforce global capitalism. The construction over the next few years by government space agencies of a so-called International Space Station, and all the attendant propaganda, is just one example of this effort. Autonomous Astronauts express their antagonism to Zombie Culture by revealing how the working class are prevented from building their own spaceships, by planting class war viruses within multiple imaginations, using the AAA as a collective phantom to carry out cultural sabotages and media invasions, whilst continuing to expand the AAA as a world-wide, transnational network.

## Monolithic and Minor Media

Whilst Norton's media satire merges currents of the 1930s with those of the 1990s, we might stress the crucial differences between the monolithic media, their bureaucratic and commercial organisation and the organisation of the masses in the 1930s versus the dispersed media and class composition of the 1990s. Guattari's concept of post-media presented a shift in 'highly complex industrialised society' in the post-war period towards molecularisation, a diffusion of power, through which 'minor' struggles assume a new importance. The post-89 period was dominated by the prospects of a new phase of the globalisation of both capitalism and class struggle.<sup>213</sup> During the 1990s small groups and networks experimented widely with techniques of informal organisation, networking, misinformation, fabulation and 'self-institution'. Spoofing the media and corporate institutions was prevalent in new media and net art scenes.<sup>214</sup> Attempting to re-orient themselves to new challenges, small groups retrieved tendencies experimented with in left cultural milieus from the 1930s and 1970s. In 1920s and 1930s Europe, major powers crumbled and big media was establishing itself while thousands of small magazines proliferated.<sup>215</sup> By the 1990s monolithic media was looking obsolete and began to give way to smaller and more accessible media forms. The defeat of the workers' movement (felt tangibly in the 1986 Wapping dispute and 1984-85 Miners' strike), the break-up of the Socialist bloc and end of the cold war reenergised questions of communism and community not as new molar formations but rather as dynamically bound-up with a dissolution of monolithic entities that ushered in molecular formations that often associated with a specific mediatic component.

Focusing on film and radio Walter Benjamin had conceived a deployment of new technologies or combinations of media '*to train human beings in the apperception and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily.*'<sup>216</sup> Rather than simply avow the lo-fi, as prior subcultures such as punks and hippies had, post-media operators advocated a media-promiscuity and practice a kind of 'deconditioning' from mainstream media by 'manipulating their own manipulation'.<sup>217</sup> In distinction from the hype of the new – often

213 I take this notion of a 'globalisation' of both class and capital from the introduction to Mastaneh Shah-Shuja, *Zones of Proletarian Development*. London: OpenMute, 2008.

214 Cf. Josephine Berry, *The Thematics of Site-Specific Art on the Net*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the Degree of Art History in the Faculty of Arts, 2001, available, [http://www.metamute.org/sites/www.metamute.org/files/thesis\\_final\\_0.doc](http://www.metamute.org/sites/www.metamute.org/files/thesis_final_0.doc) [Accessed 17 July, 2017] A part of Berry's thesis was published by Inventory as Josephine Berry, 'Another Orwellian Misnomer', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.58-83.

215 Cf. Stephen Bury, *Breaking the Rules: The Printed Face of the European Avant Garde 1900-1937*, London: British Library, 2007.

216 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility', op. cit., p.108 (emphasis in the original).

217 'Post-media Operators: Sovereign & Vague', p.18.

symbolised in offices and workspaces of this period by the colourful transparency of the Apple G3 IMac – Info Centre deployed in their displays outmoded-looking office equipment – the pin chart, filing cabinet and index. This old media before new media attitude was also evident in articulations of hybrid spaces, the reading room established from the first exhibition was notably paper-based and offline, while an online archive – a ‘pool’ of texts – developed later, acted in parallel to printed pamphlets, and was part of a transition point to internationalising their activities and initiating the Copenhagen Free University in their flat in Copenhagen. *Inventory* similarly developed a website primarily as an archive and contact page, closely imitating the aesthetic of the journal itself.<sup>218</sup> In the context of their Inventory Survey Project, *Inventory* list the technologies deployed: ‘photocopier, fax, digital camera, dictaphone, radio transmitter and laptop’ as ‘merely instruments that are easily subverted’.<sup>219</sup> Nonetheless, most of the initiatives assembled at Info Centre depended intensively upon a combination of email, internet research, telephone, fax and face to face meetings for their organisation and these communications tools facilitated local as well as international collaborations and sales of printed matter. *Inventory* had already established, through their fiercely sociological methodology, an inseparability of objectivity (information, data) and subjectivity (experience, interpretation).

*Inventory* may be thought of as a kind of viral programme, searching for any type of data or interesting phenomena that displays a renegade adaptability, a fusing of disparate elements that have some importance for sociality: our fierce sociology is passionate about everyday life, its arrangements and mutations.<sup>220</sup>

Whilst *Inventory* embraced the new opportunities for aggregation of materials, information, pattern and systems that the internet, and the developments in communications technology which brought it about, provided, their outlook insisted upon reflection and transformation which would act creatively and reflexively on ‘facts’ and ‘categories’ and release them from their utility or functionality.<sup>221</sup> *Inventory* indicated that it’s ‘task has always been to resist the easy formulas of categorisation, not so as to suspend judgement, but to act as a drug that wishes to erode the sclerosis of thought, idea and action.’<sup>222</sup> Sclerosis is a stiffening or hardening and in this metaphorical sense, stands in for the ‘reification’ produced by commodity-exchange or separation of ‘thought, idea and

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218 i.e. the printed page. This website was hosted by backspace now archived at <http://bak.spc.org/> [Accessed 17 July, 2017].

219 *Inventory*, ‘Without Intent’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.4-9, p.6.

220 Excerpt from artists statement quoted in, Renée Turner, ‘Inside the Archive: Inventory prepares’, Flickr Archive (2001), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/degeuzen/2977001431/in/album-72157608409636386/>

221 ‘Orpheus Street’, op. cit.

222 *Inventory*, ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.5-13, p.5.

action'.<sup>223</sup> To act on sclerosis as a drug suggests to render sclerosis either fluid, or 'open the doors of perception' upon this condition. *Inventory* and Slater are, I contend, then closer to Walter Benjamin in their understanding of 'the reduction of experience by the commodity form', as Howard Caygill has it. Like Benjamin, they tend to 'look for moments of excess within the experience of reification.'<sup>224</sup> Slater establishes this, though not exclusively, in relation to the affordances of contemporary media and their combination, for *Inventory* these possibilities are contingent upon a restructuring of modern urban experience, memory and the active experience of the city itself. *Inventory*'s biological metaphor brings us very close to the call for de-categorisation and auto-theorisation proposed by Slater as the hallmarks of his 'post-media operators'. As Slater has it, the refusal to separate theorisation from everyday life, or theory from action, is

to re-create what is meant by 'theorising', to refuse to differentiate it from 'everyday' activity, experience and experiment is to be engaged in a process of de-conditioning; a translating and de-translating of the 'inexhaustible stores of material' that, by means of memory and conscience, make of everyone an auto-theorist. Such a process, in not confining problems to discourse nor in seeking to compress them within formal, dispassionate and conclusive restraints, is a process of social engagement.<sup>225</sup>

Animated engagement runs throughout this call and *Inventory*'s writing, particularly its editorial pronouncements. Slater describes in, and perhaps between, post-media magazines, websites and journals a 'febrile communication' which takes place and argues that 'post-media can be a site of transparent passion'.<sup>226</sup> For *Inventory*, passion decisively offsets empiricism, for example through their intention to be 'passionately objective', or when they write: 'our fierce sociology is passionate about everyday life, its arrangements and mutations'.<sup>227</sup> Nonetheless, as Maria Galletti stresses in relation to the *College* and *Acephale*, mediation, in *Inventory*'s case by both sociological method and the journal, is crucial.<sup>228</sup> By producing a model of communication which was engaged in 'the search and establishment of a singular and multiple voice(s)' the journal deliberately sought to destabilise its own authority or apparently disinterested formality and displace it with passionate

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223 In a discursive interview between Matthew Fuller, Howard Slater and editors of *Everything Magazine*, Slater says: 'the way the media works, it's almost like reification, we don't even notice the way the media works insidiously on us, the way people seek legitimisation for their practice.' Howard Slater quoted in Matthew Fuller, Howard Slater and editors of *Everything Magazine*, 'Everything Editorial', *Everything Magazine*, No.3.2, 2000, pp.36-38.

224 Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin the Colour of Experience*. London; New York: Routledge, 1998, p.129.

225 'Post-media Operators: Sovereign & Vague', p.16.

226 Both quotations, 'Post-media Operators: an Imaginary Address', op. cit.

227 Respectively, 'For a Sociology', *Inventory*, Vol.1, No.1, 1995 and 'Orpheus Street', op. cit., as above.

228 'It was one thing to accept that an active sociology might encompass lived experience if it were bolstered by a proper sociological methodology, but it was another thing altogether for it to consist of lived experience alone.' *The Sacred Conspiracy*, op. cit., p.418.

engagement, by lending the anonymity of its ‘singular’ voice to others, it opened itself to ‘multiple voice(s)’.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> ‘We Refuse to Confirm Your Beliefs’, *op. cit.*, p.5.



# **Chapter 7**

**Flesh and Stone:**

**Inventorising the City**

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# Introduction

## *Inventory* and the Last Days of London

The last chapters have focused on *Inventory*'s interest in theory and literary and group form as means through which they articulated their praxis. In this chapter, I turn to look at their relation to and concern with the urban environment, which constitutes another integral aspect of their unique response to the politics of their times, as well as another key way in which their interest in the ethnographic-sociological methods of Bataille and Benjamin were worked out. In this chapter I establish key factors determining the urban environment of London during the operating period of *Inventory* journal. I then lay out the resources which *Inventory* drew upon, complementing their fiercely sociological approach with broadly journalistic research, as well as Marxist and post-structuralist sources to establish a picture of the built environment and its transformation over time through human practice in a series of case studies. As we will see, the city even became a model or metaphor through which they came to understand the literary or publication form of the journal.

By grouping articles spread across the 10 year span of the journal I argue, through the specific essays which I consider as 'urban studies', that *Inventory* established an unique model for the analysis of the city.<sup>1</sup> Their motivation for studying the city, is established through the method (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) which aspired to analyse the 'sacred' and 'communifying' phenomena of human community and 'things' in a way which combined objective knowledge and subjective experience. Regulating this approach was inspiration drawn from surrealism and the Situationist International understood as privileging primarily 'urban experience', and development of the journal form in close reciprocity with the street, something evident in surrealist and dada journals and vocally advocated for by Walter Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> Whilst I focus on a group of articles I understand as a set of urban case studies (focussed on a specific building, estate, area or town),

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1 I am therefore arguing that though there may be no direct influence, the approaches developed by *Inventory* in these essays amounts to a substantial contribution to the criticism of late-20th and early-21st century capitalist urbanism and that there is now a substantial body of literature which arrives at similar modes of analysis.

2 'The Surrealists were concerned with an essentially urban experience, one which more than any other relies on manmade invention, the beguiling complexities of the city are at the same time rewardingly revealing, a playground for the physiologist, the psychologist, the pathologist and the anthropologist. Totally detached from natural circumstance and the predestined cycle of personal change, growth and decay; the artificial environment of the metropolis is not only a law unto itself, but also far more likely to provide those internal collisions of chance that shock the consciousness into the experience of profane illumination.' Paul Claydon, "'Botanizing on the Asphalt': Walter Benjamin and the City', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.36-65, pp.36-38, p.47.

alongside these I attempt to sketch other contemporary approaches, focusing in particular on the influence of filmmaker Patrick Keiller, and a significant contribution to the journal by British novelist Iain Sinclair. Though influential, I argue that *Inventory* in fact ultimately distinguish themselves from Sinclair and the culture he was a part of, their publishing praxis therefore criticises a parallel *literary* practice. The penultimate section of the chapter examines experimental, playful and literary approaches to built and topological space through the collaborative writing practices of the core editorial group and the journal's many contributors. This account continues to develop the originality of the artists' and experimental writing published in the journal initially discussed in Chapter 5. This chapter is governed by an attention to key sites and zones in the city for *Inventory* and the movement through this terrain therefore follows a pattern *Inventory* themselves criss-crossed in the writing and perambulations. This is further reflected in the closing sections of this chapter which considers the fate of London in the early 21st century and the ways in which *Inventory*'s urban essays had generated an original approach to the urban problems of the post-war development of London and presciently characterised changes undergone by the London Metropolitan area during the 1990s and early 2000s.

The lines of communication, one-way systems, blind alley ways and sutures through the city become a mesh of scars, the street plan an intricate web of tattoos, the under-ground an infinite intestinal tract.

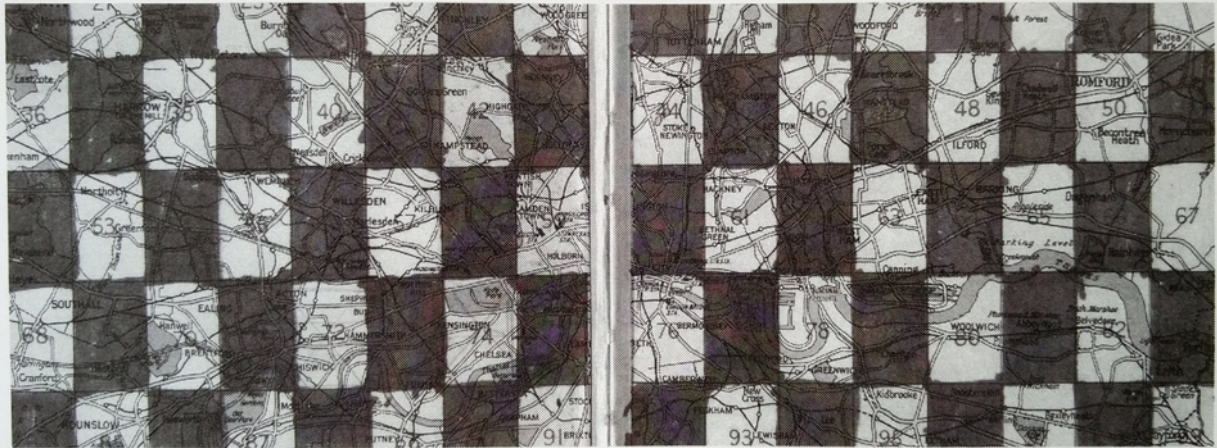


Image: Inventory, *Sticker Project*, (c.1999)

This period was to be one of intense transformation for London, driven by the worldwide phenomenon of globalisation and financialisation which has had distinct local spatial, economic and cultural effects. My initial thesis is that *Inventory* as a journal and a group studied the presuppositions of the process of transformation of London into a 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘global city’.<sup>3</sup> A second and more tentative line of reasoning is that *Inventory*’s work responded to the shifting ground upon which postmodern discourse, postmodern architectural design and neoliberal economic agendas met and achieved a transformational catalysis. In this context *Inventory*’s analyses worked to understand the transformations taking place and its roots in the strategic consensus of a ‘failure’ of both modernism and the welfare state. In a marginal but consistent way *Inventory* challenged this consensus and developed new integrated means of critique – in writing and in spatial practice – of the new modes of capitalist development of urban space and its concomitant ideologies in which this characterised this period.

## Flesh and Stone

The title of this chapter alludes to the title of a book by Richard Sennett, which lays out an analysis of the western city in history, from the ancient to modern periods, from an Anglo-Foucauldian perspective.<sup>4</sup> ‘Flesh and stone’ was used in as a title in several instances by *Inventory*.<sup>5</sup> The phrase provides a poetic couplet with which to characterise a set of problems the group confronted in myriad ways – the human condition, its shaping by, and reflection in, built form.<sup>6</sup> It is this dynamic interaction between the shaping of space from above, its analysis and the embodiment of experience from below which the journal relentlessly explored.

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- 3 An epithet which now seems potentially under threat after the vote in favour of the UK’s ‘Brexit’ from the EU by national referendum on 23 June 2016. For an account of the ‘global city’ see Saskia Sassen, ‘The Global City: Introducing a Concept’. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2005): pp.27-43. On the same commentator’s fears post-Brexit see Saskia Sassen, ‘Brexit: London can safeguard its global city status’, July 24, 2016, <<https://www.ft.com/content/0ba694ba-4a9f-11e6-8d68-72e9211e86ab#ixzz4LXphIpNL>> [Accessed, 20/04/2017] Though it deserves to be mentioned, one of Charles Leadbeter’s ‘five scenarios for the city post-Brexit’ includes a forecast for the city of London as a European enclave within a ‘re-nationalised’ UK. See, Charles Leadbeter, ‘London’s Future: A Brief Guide’, *Financial Times*, 22 July 2016, <<https://www.ft.com/content/70614aee-4e82-11e6-8172-e39ecd3b86fc>> [Accessed, 20/04/2017].
  - 4 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994.
  - 5 The shortened title, ‘Flesh and Stone’, was appropriated by *Inventory* for two texts and a video work by *Inventory* editors (the second text cited here is derived from the voiceover to the video). Cf. Paul Claydon, ‘Flesh and Stone’, Glossary section, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, p.48 and *Inventory*, ‘Flesh and Stone’, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005, pp.44–50.
  - 6 A key example which looks at this problem from the opposite perspective – from that of the body – is Damian Abbott’s essay ‘Extensive Bodies’, in which he argues for ‘science’ as a slow, but ‘revolutionary’ process of developing a ‘programmatic mapping of the body, an enclosure of the organs one by one’ (pp.117–120) to become an ‘inanimate container’ or ‘machines for living in’ each of which are, for Abbott, ‘structures of the spatial organisation of a colonial mentality’ (p.120), Damian Abbott, ‘Extensive Bodies’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1, 2000, pp.117-131.

In an entry in on ‘Architecture’ in *Documents* Georges Bataille theorised the relationship between the human form and architecture in negative terms.<sup>7</sup> This was the optic through which Denis Hollier would produce *Against Architecture*, an an early exemplary deconstructivist account of Bataille’s thought.<sup>8</sup> Prison, for Bataille was the archetype of all architecture, the counterexample to Hegel’s tomb.<sup>9</sup> Hegel had attributed to architecture the foundation of the arts, and the archetype of the tomb is for Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, ‘architecture in its purest form’ – building not intended for dwelling, but purely symbolic.<sup>10</sup> In his schema Hegel emphasised the limited capacity for expression of architecture, the most abstract of the arts because it lacks language.<sup>11</sup> Architecture’s lack of expression makes it one of the more primitive of the arts, but its fate – to fail to provide for spiritual expression – anticipates the dissolution of each of the arts.<sup>12</sup> According to Hegel, architecture’s strength is drawn from the way that it separates man from dependence on the monotony of nature, it allows man to dwell in an alienated state, which provides temporary succour from displacement, without permitting the overcoming of displacement, which is man’s condition.<sup>13</sup> These ideas, indicating architecture’s ultimate purposelessness vis-a-vis direct human need, can be linked to *Inventory*’s complex orientation towards a critique of architecture from several perspectives. On the one hand these respond to Bataille’s proposition of architecture as a form of confinement of

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7 Georges Bataille, ‘Architecture’, translated in Georges Bataille, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Writers Associated with George Bataille and the Acephale Group*, London: Atlas Press, 1997, pp.35-36.

8 The original French title of Hollier’s book was *Place de la Concorde*, after one of the largest squares in Paris, a site of specific significance for Bataille since this was where violent nationalist riots took place in February 1934 and the site where King Louis XVI was executed on 21 January 1793, an action he would attempt to re-stage in the early days of the Popular Front in France in the mid-1930s. The name of the square translates as ‘place of agreement’, it was briefly renamed *Place de la Révolution* after the French Revolution of 1789. Bataille’s strong association with this site suggests a reading of it as the locus of deep fractures in French society: a place of disagreement between a popular, autonomous sovereignty and that derived from and conscripted by the monarch. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: Writings of Georges Bataille*. New edition edition. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.

9 In the motto for the famous ideogram of Acephale drawn by Andre Masson for the journal they initiated together Bataille pronounced ‘man will escape his head as a convict escapes his prison’. Bataille quoted in *Against Architecture*, op. cit., p.xi from OC 1:676 from unpublished notes for an issue of *Acephale*. See *Against Architecture*, op. cit., pp.4-13. The symbolism of the tomb is explored in Paul Claydon’s essay, ‘Essays on the Task of Mourning’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.6-12 and in its symbolic and utopian connotations in Nick Norton, ‘Estate Map’: ‘The map of the estate is an eulogy for Utopia [...] The map of the estate is an epitaph (that architects and planners will habitually erect before some others’ tombstone while never suspecting how they designed it for themselves). The map of the estate is an epiphany of symbols and silence in the long – alarmed night.’ Nick Norton, ‘Estate Map’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999 pp.15-16.

10 The quotation is from *Against Architecture*, op. cit., p.4.

11 Tod McGowan, ‘We are Already Dwelling: Hegel and the Transcendence of Place’, in Nadir Lahiji (Ed.), *The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture*, A&C Black, 2014, p.57. According to Anthony Vidler: ‘Architecture is thereby bound from the start to a fate that denies it the possibility of expressing any but the most general ideas of a culture, and these in a fundamentally inflexible and often ambiguous way.’ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992, p.124.

12 Both Anthony Vidler and Denis Hollier conceive this as the ‘Hegelian Edifice’: a tomb for art, a formulation which itself may bear some implications for *Inventory*’s own self-distancing from ‘fine art’. The only prohibitions stipulated by the editorial group directing *Inventory* were against combinations of ‘words and images’ which had a ‘scientific character’ or ‘artistic, literary value’. *Inventory*, ‘Notes to Contributors’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995.

13 ‘We are Already Dwelling’, op. cit., p.57.



mankind. On the other many *Inventory* contributions display a fascination with defuncted architecture: '[a]bandoned buildings [...] are fascinating because they reveal the architecture in a pure, elemental state.'<sup>14</sup> Frequently present is an insistence on the relation of (even purposeless) architecture to human scale and the human body: '[w]hen the glass is knocked out of a window the building acquires a gaze. It looks back from those sockets, a skull, Golgotha.'<sup>15</sup> Humankind's fundamental homelessness and alienation is the figure – conceived as the 'alcoholic', 'sovereign', 'shaman', 'outlier' or 'stranger' – against whom all architecture is judged to be lacking in its inability to provide refuge for.<sup>16</sup> In capitalism architecture is a commodity, a value, but through debt, privation and dependence (the need for shelter) human needs are bound to capital's needs.<sup>17</sup> In aphorisms printed on stickers and attached to surfaces throughout cities the group developed strong identifications with the state of displacement and a kind of affirmative nomadism: '[r]eplace putting down roots and the inevitability of being uprooted with the strategy of pitching and breaking camp' and '[l]et architecture mirror our basic needs both functionally and symbolically: MAKE IT COLLAPSIBLE.'<sup>18</sup> These slogans propose both an embattled and ambivalent stance in relation to the objective and subjective forms of repression and displacement analysed in *Inventory*'s urban studies.

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14 Edward Whittaker, 'Uninhabited Architecture', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.20–21.

15 Ibid.

16 Cf. *Inventory*, 'I Kingsland Passage', Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.4–6; *Inventory*, 'Without Intent', Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.4–11 Adam Scrivener, 'Stranger', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.86–94; Adam Scrivener, 'Alcoholic', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.86–87; *Inventory*, 'Outlier', Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.4–7; Adam Scrivener, 'Requiem For The Empty Quarter', Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.92–97.

17 'We accept the capitalist spatial regime because we need shelter, somewhere to live. A vast majority suffers because they are made to believe that they have no choice but to take on an enormous debt. They are index-linked into their home and therefore their survival. Debt creates and stimulates obedience towards the politics and economics of contemporary capitalism – their debt to society that may not even be paid off by the time they reach old age. Moreover, we even turn upon each other, landlords rip-off their tenants, local councils are defrauded by 'hotels' charging exorbitant rates to cram in as many asylum seekers as they can. Others 'speculate' and redevelop second or third homes in order to profit from another's need for a space to live.' Adam Scrivener, 'Peripatetical Meditation', notes accompanying the film *Flesh and Stone*, 'Texte zu Adam Scrivener und Inventory', undated, c.2005–6, available, [https://www.wildcapital.net/material/231WK\\_TEXTSCRIVENER\\_DE.pdf](https://www.wildcapital.net/material/231WK_TEXTSCRIVENER_DE.pdf) [Accessed 17 March, 2018]

18 Stickers printed as part of *Inventory*, *Smash this Puny Existence*, Bookworks, 1999. I return to these slogans at the end of this chapter.



Image: Inventory, *Sticker Project*, (c.1999)

In his essay on 'Oracular Architecture' Paul Claydon posits a 'lost bridge' between a 'harmony of materials and biological process' which distinguishes animal from human architecture.<sup>19</sup> In the very form of the journal generally, and specifically in the anti-epistemological turns and twists of the glossary, architecture's symbolic and systematic status is debunked through its interrelation with textual architecture which then become elements to subvert: the index of contents, dictionary, list, encyclopedia and glossary. The linguistic-architectural archetype of the Tower of Babel, a symbolic-material edifice through which the impossibility of completion and very possibility of communication coexist – through the concatenation and concentration of human energies into a common culture – shadows closely this project.<sup>20</sup> But there are further bases for the close association between the journal form and the modern, pre-modern and postmodern city. For, as Lewis Mumford argues in a striking passage of *The City in History* (1961),

[t]he swish and crackle of paper is the underlying sound of the metropolis [...] [a]ll the major activities of the metropolis are directly connected with paper and its plastic substitutes; and printing and packaging are among its principal industries.<sup>21</sup>

For Mumford this not 'the real world', but 'a shadow world projected [...] at every moment by means of paper and celluloid and adroitly manipulated lights'.<sup>22</sup> Print, paper and media, according to Mumford, constitute this 'metropolitan world' and these materials and the techniques associated with them become for *Inventory* a *real, material*, way of self-mediating – or manipulating their own manipulation – their own detachment from its major narratives and isolation from its other inhabitants; reassembling and reconstructing the city in terms they could understand and take agency over.

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19 A conceptualisation which critically revisits the famous discussion by Karl Marx on the difference between architects and bees. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.I*, (Trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach), London: Penguin, 1990, pp.283-284.

20 As Derrida writes, the Tower of Babel stands also for 'incompletion': 'The "tower of Babel" does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics.' Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', in *Difference in Translation*, (Ed.) Joseph F. Graham Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985, pp.165–207, p.167.

21 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. London & New York: Penguin Books, 1961, p.622.

22 Ibid.



Image: Humphrey Spender, Graffiti, Bolton (as part of Mass-Observation's 'Worktown study'), September 1937

This chapter, then, approaches *Inventory* journal from the point of view of architecture and urbanism, but here architecture is understood throughout in its close proximity and constitutive interrelation to print, publishing and the ‘shadow’ and ‘restless’ systems print can embody. Following Benjamin’s scriptural directive towards ‘the inconspicuous forms’ (leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards) generated by ‘active communities’, and like Mass-Observation, *Inventory* paid close attention to the construction of urban space through paper and writing systems: placards; advertising; litter; graffiti; estate and road signage; found texts.<sup>23</sup> Their own writing and publishing ventures used print to gather together and concentrate centrally the fragmented studies of built space communicated by their correspondents. The writing was mass-observational not in scale – because *Inventory*’s urban studies were generally carried out by individual contributors – but in the quality of observation which took a ‘mass’ perspective by including a record of the subjective experience of place on the observer.<sup>24</sup> If the built environment mediates between flesh and stone, dwellings and the beings these are fashioned to house or contain, paper and writing reconstructs the city with means accessible to *Inventory*’s contributors and readers and recentres it around their concerns.

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23 Walter Benjamin, ‘Filling Station’ in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, (Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter), London: NLB, 1979, p.45. Mass Observation understood ‘newspapers as active venues for coincidence’ (Shirley), famously studied a series of mysterious ‘litter trails’ and ‘saw graffiti as a form of expressive art’, see respectively Rosemary Shirley, *Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture*, London & New York: Routledge, 2016, pp.62–70 and Bolton Worktown Archive, <https://boltonworktown.co.uk/themes/graffiti> [Accessed 22 December, 2018]

24 ‘[O]n the personal benefits of mass-observation. They claimed that systematic observing offered its participants the possibility of heightening their powers of observation, of expressing otherwise unexpressed feelings, of giving them new interest in and greater understanding of their own lives, and of maybe even bringing about a permanent change in the observers themselves’. Jennings and Madge quoted in Jeremy MacClancy, ‘Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.1, No.3, September 1995, pp. 495-512, p.510.



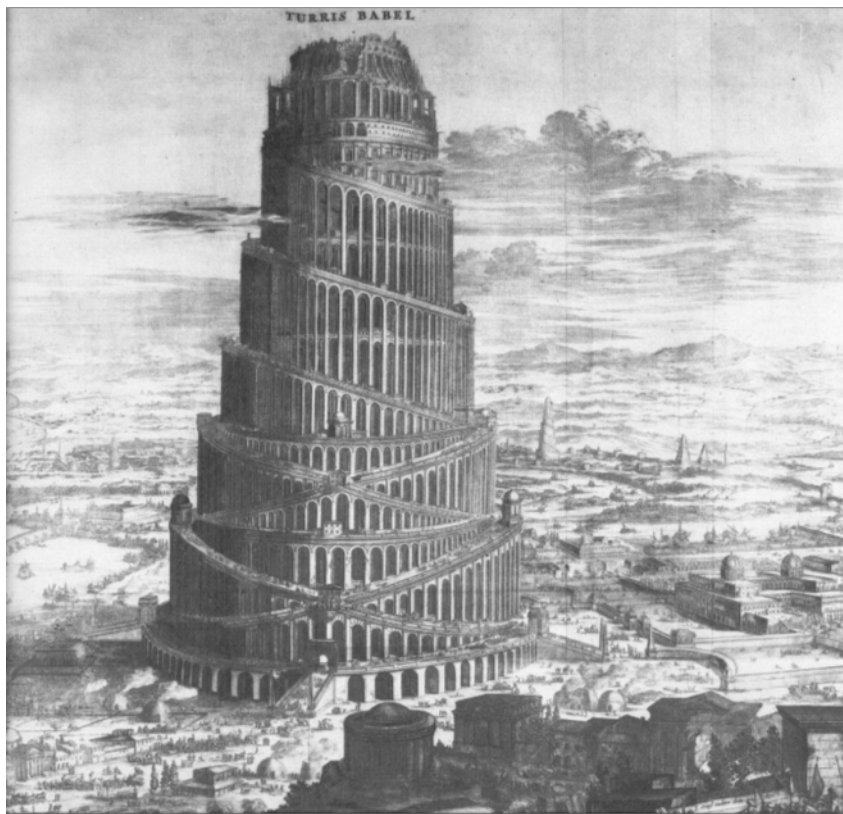


Image: Anastasius Kirschner, two engravings of *The Tower of Babel*, c.1660s

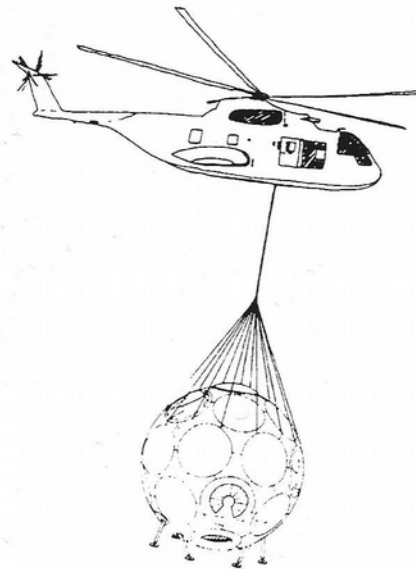
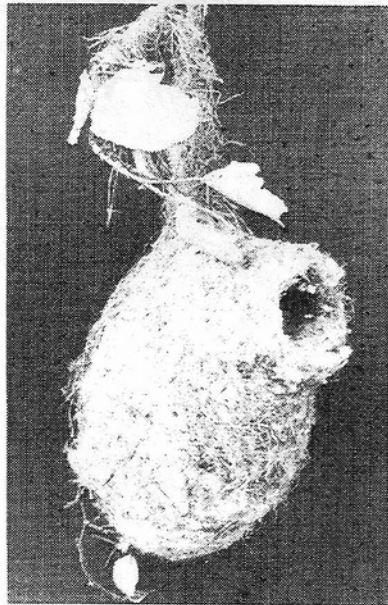
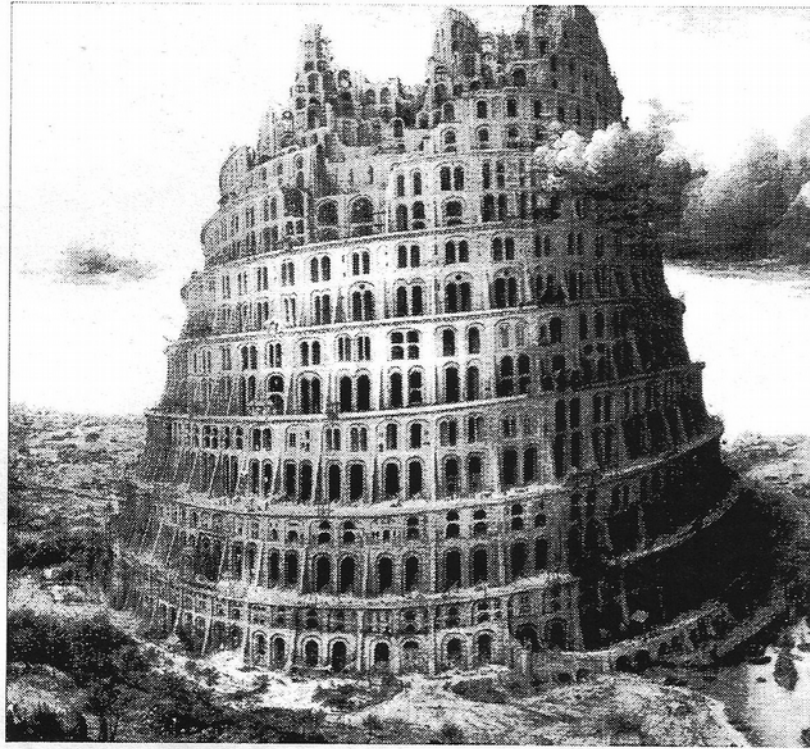


Image: Illustrations to Paul Claydon, 'Oracular Architecture', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.95-113, p.107



## Tomb and Prison

*Inventory* relate the architectural archetypes tomb and prison to the architectural sites in the purview of their urban studies. *Inventory* editor Adam Scrivener's essay (1999) on the shifting fortunes of the Marquess Estate, discussed in Chapter 6 with regard to *Estate Map* (1999), in Islington studies the estate as the site of violent death and, over time, 'its easy transition from pseudo-rural idyll to prison camp.'<sup>25</sup>

The tomb, or mausoleum, was related earlier, in a text by *Inventory* editor Paul Claydon, to the dialectical concept of the sacred, purposelessness (or inutility) and the death of God.<sup>26</sup> In an extended meditation on 'Death' *Inventory*'s editors collectively asserted that, '[a] deeper understanding of death should make us sovereign authors of our own unlimited imaginings and joyous communions'.<sup>27</sup> The figure of Acephale represents man's condition generalised by the 'death of god', an amoral condition. A relationship of equilibrium between human form and architecture was established by the Roman architectural theorist Vitruvius who sought to prove that symmetry and mathematical proportion were common to both, a proposition Hollier understands as 'encyclopaedic'.<sup>28</sup> Bataille on the other hand regarded man's mind (his head) as a prison-house which binds him to human form and thus exactly those humanist limits Vitruvius established. Acephale allegorises man's struggle against limits and against his own condition, represented by his own humanoid shell.

A restaging of the image of Acephale in *Inventory* involved editor Adam Scrivener photographed, torso exposed, arms outstretched, rendered briefly headless by the t-shirt pulled up over his head. This image was then superimposed onto the site of the Roman Temple of Mithras close to Cannon Street in the City of London.<sup>29</sup> This sequence of images attempts to align mythical objects and sites

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25 The prison, as we saw in the previous chapter, was also invoked in the search for new community explored in Howard Slater, 'New Acephale', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.71-75.. Adam Scrivener, 'Open Yet Excluded', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.78-91, p.78. The characterisation of the estate is not externally imposed hyperbole, the appellation was drawn from a letter sent by a tenant to a local Islington newspaper, signed by the complainant 'Inmate Marquess Prison Camp', 'Open Yet Excluded', op. cit., p.84.

26 'Intended for no functional purpose, this building lent its name to the language of funerary architecture as the *Mausoleum*. This is what the church has become, each individual chapel contributing to form one vast, fragmented necropolis commemorating the death of God.' 'Essays on the Task of Mourning', op. cit, p.7.

27 *Inventory*, 'Death', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.138-141, p.139.

28 'Against Architecture', op. cit., p.35-36. 'All branches of knowledge converge thus in architecture, which for this reason occupies a position that can be very exactly defined as encyclopedic.' Ibid., p.36

29 Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London', *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.72-77, p.74. As discussed elsewhere, the pseudonymous authorship of this text, I assert, can be attributed to *Inventory*'s editors based on the

with ‘mysteries’ of contemporary London: featuring ruins, tombs, bricked-up houses, burnt cars, the London Stone ‘smash the stone, unleash its forces’, as well as newspaper clippings suggesting financial crises and a headline proclaiming ‘the Last Days of London’.<sup>30</sup> The Last Days of London proclaims a London emptied of content by financialisation to the point of crisis and non-reproduction, its ‘people, like its architecture, ground into dust.’<sup>31</sup>

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use of the name in the earlier editorial Inventory, ‘I Kingsland Passage’, Inventory, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.4–6. The London Stone and Temple of Mithras were both recently restored in ways which binds each monument much closer to the financial institutions they now stand amidst, see Mark Brown, “‘Karma restored’: mythical London Stone returns to its City home’, 23 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/23/karma-restored-mythical-london-stone-returns-to-its-city-home> and <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/> [Accessed 22 December, 2018]

30 ‘The Last Days of London’ is also a part of the title of Patrick Wright’s 1991 book, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, (1991) 2009.

31 ‘The last days of London. Dark storm clouds muster above an open sewer that knows know shame, that will not flinch from the degradation it enforces on a daily basis. Its people, like its architecture, ground into dust. Only the conceit remains; its vainglorious, knowing, arrogance, its belligerent mental and social strictures.’ p.73

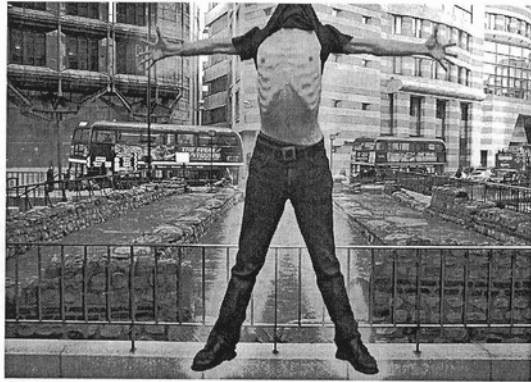


Image: Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London', *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, p.74

Architecture, in the reading of Bataille staged by Hollier, represents the projection of humanist form on the built environment, 'the latter being only the development of the former'.<sup>32</sup> Bataille's dictionary entry on 'Architecture', uses the example of the prison as a metaphor for humankind's self-confinement in unfreedom, to interject a thoroughgoing negativity into the relationship between architecture and humanity proposing the destruction of both in their present form.<sup>33</sup>

Architecture is, for Bataille, synonymous with the promotion of good behaviour, imposed 'admiration and wonder'. For Paul Claydon, 'architecture serves as an abstracted language of power'.<sup>34</sup> The understanding of architecture as a 'language' opens up to the tensions between printed edifice – the book – and the built edifice – the building. Both books and buildings order thought and experience and structure its recovery. Yet, as suggested through the myth of the Tower of Babel, an image figuratively exploited frequently in the journal, tensions between language or the word and architecture provoke cultural fears of chaotic violence and rivalry. Keller Easterling paints a phantasmagoric vision of the printed word's relationship to architecture in the work of Victor Hugo, who

famously observed that 'architecture [like that of the cathedral] was developed in proportion with human thought; it became a giant with a thousand heads and a thousand arms, and fixed all this floating symbolism in an eternal, visible, palpable form.' [...] the printed word usurped architecture as the vessel of cultural imagination and stole its supernatural power. Hugo prophesied, 'This will kill that. The book will kill the edifice.'<sup>35</sup>

This tension is in keeping with the hostility Bataille expressed in *Documents* – that the new encyclopedia must go beyond architecture if it is to exceed the stable relation between its own proportions and those of human thought. Paper's challenge to architecture is seen as necessary to deter its will to 'dominate the whole earth'.<sup>36</sup> The encyclopedia, glossary, or critical dictionary must become more supple and flexible if it is to act as a springboard for the extensive wandering of human thought and freedom and not arrest it by 'eternal, visible, palpable form', mere dogmatism and stasis.<sup>37</sup> The history and archetypes of architecture were to be integral to the *Inventory's* sense

32 Georges Bataille, 'Architecture', in Georges Bataille, *Encyclopaedia Acephalica: Writers Associated with George Bataille and the Acephale Group*, London: Atlas Press, 1997, pp.35-36.

33 'From the very outset, in any case, the human and architectural orders make common cause, the latter being only the development of the former. Therefore an attack on architecture, whose monumental productions now truly dominate the whole earth, grouping the servile multitudes under their shadow, imposing admiration and wonder, order and constraint, is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man.' 'Architecture', op. cit. / Ibid.

34 Paul Claydon, 'Oracular Architecture', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.95-113, p.106.

35 Victor Hugo quoted in Keller Easterling, *Extrastatescraft*, London: Verso, 2016, p.15.9 / 523 (Ebook).

36 'Architecture', op. cit.

37 Victor Hugo quoted in *Extrastatescraft*, op. cit.

of its own technology as a form for knowledge, storage and readership. Two early metaphors for the world wide web were on the one hand architecture and on the other the printed page.<sup>38</sup> The journal therefore retains the challenge to its oldest rival, whilst the emergence of new technology, a new paradigm of communications architecture – the internet – was itself challenging the printed edifice.

Prior to investigating the vagaries of UK housing and planning policy, the group first needed working categories with which to understand space and social practices in urban space. In his ‘Essay on the Task of Mourning’ (1995) for the first issue of the journal, *Inventory* member Paul Claydon made connections similar to Bataille’s between the death of god and architecture. The text related mourning to the ‘passing of Communist Russia’, an event strongly associated with the postmodern turn. In the third section of ‘Three Essays on the Task of Mourning’, Claydon considered the Copernican revolution in terms of the ‘displacement of ourselves (humankind) as the centre of the universe’.<sup>39</sup> These conceptual sea changes are rendered in both metaphysical and spatial terms.<sup>40</sup>

This cosmological framework, which enlightenment science bestowed on the universe would be brought down to earth into the ‘world within worlds’ of the late-20th century city. In *Inventory*’s writing and publishing practice the city would figure as a Heraclitan flux ‘infinite in variety and space and liquid in its movement’.<sup>41</sup> However, capitalist urban space was structured by contradictions and countervailing tendencies and as the group investigated concrete urban spaces in their details, specificities and life-worlds they would seek out engagement with theories which could encapsulate the micropolitical movements of individual actors and the movements of the economic totality. ‘[T]he streets provide a key to the forces that shaped them.’<sup>42</sup> Guided by the Benjaminian maxim, that ‘the Inventory of the streets is inexhaustible’, *Inventory* suggested a limitless and resistant reserve of social facts to be investigated. In this sense, *Inventory*’s approach relates closely to Benjamin’s adaptation of late-19th century ‘physiognomies’ – typologies or ‘populations’ of archetypal urban dwellers – which, according to Rolf Tiedemann, generated

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38 ‘there is already a lot of “book” in the digital – the vector of incursion moving as much from print to digital as it does from the digital into our notionally stable, ‘enshrined’ cultural form of the book.’ Simon Worthington, “Danger: Contains Books,” in Mieke Gerritzen, Geert Lovink, and Minke Kampman (Eds.), *I Read Where I Am: Exploring New Information Cultures*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011, p.174 quoted in Nicholas Thoburn, *The Anti-Book*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016, p.52.

39 ‘Essays on the Task of Mourning’, op. cit, pp.11-13.

40 ‘Copernicus alongside Tycho Brahe and Gallileo smashed the ptolomeic foundations of astronomical thinking and with it the notion that the earth, or more specifically man (as only man has the power to ‘name’) was the centre of the known universe. [...] As the religious meta-topology crumbled the new practices of astronomy hinted at a universe infinite in variety and space and liquid in its movement rather than a structured, static, hierarchical and monotheistic whole.’ Ibid., p.11.

41 Ibid.

42 Paul Claydon, ‘Oracular Architecture’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.95-113, p.109.

‘materialist physiognomies’ he ‘understood as a complement, or an extension, of Marxist theory.’<sup>43</sup> Bataille mockingly related the notion of physiognomy to built space in his dictionary entry on architecture.<sup>44</sup> In the face of a period of, as urbanist Ana Vilenica has characterised it, ‘anti-social(ist) urban transition’ *Inventory*’s interpretation of the city’s appearances and fragments provided for a vector directed towards investigation of the totality of capitalist ‘forces’ which shaped local particularities.<sup>45</sup>

The collective is governed by this law as one which applies to every citizen at birth [...] The wish image of the individual, his or her wish for liberation, for an escape from societal construction, is governed by that very rule of law from which the wish image strains to escape, that is, money.<sup>46</sup>

The dream of escape from the edifice of ‘societal construction’ is therefore balanced by measure of the forces which compel it. Developing Benjamin’s method, *Inventory* were guided in their study of the city as a totality composed of fragments by this almost phenomenological attention to the ‘tangible object’.<sup>47</sup> They too understood the aesthetic dimension of urban processes and this brought forth the necessity of deriving essence from appearances and direct experience of sites as an extension of Marxist theory, supplemented it with their own quasi-sociological method derived from dissident surrealism or surrealist ethnography which subjectively invested them in the objects of their investigations – through differing forms of ‘ecstatic exploration’ – as modalities open to the transformations which struck them.<sup>48</sup>

*Inventory*’s engagement with the condition of London, in the 1990s, characterised by both ruins and

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43 ‘Physiognomies infers the interior from the exterior; it decodes the whole from the detail; it represents the general in the particular. Nominalistically speaking, it proceeds from the tangible object; inductively it commences in the realm of the intuitive.’ Rolf Tiedemann, “‘Dialectics at a Standstill’ Approaches to the Passagen-Werk”, (Trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere) in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Belknap Press, 1999, pp.929-945, p.941 and p.940. Paul Claydon discusses Benjamin’s use of ‘physiognomies’ in “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’”, op.cit., pp.36-38.

44 ‘Architecture is the expression of the true nature of societies, as physiognomy is the expression of the nature of individuals. [...] this comparison is applicable, above all, to the physiognomy of officials (prelates, magistrates, admirals).’ Bataille, ‘Architecture’, op. cit., p.35. Cf. Also, Georges Bataille, ‘Human Face’, op. cit., pp.99-106.

45 Ana Vilenica, ‘(Out)Performing Anti-Social(ist) Urban Transition’, *Los Quaderno: Explorations in Space and Society*, No.49, September 2018, pp.41-48, available, [www.losquaderno.professionaldreamers.net](http://www.losquaderno.professionaldreamers.net) [Accessed 8 January 2019]

46 ‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’, op. cit., p.47.

47 ‘Physiognomies infers the interior from the exterior; it decodes the whole from the detail; it represents the general in the particular. Nominalistically speaking, it proceeds from the tangible object; inductively it commences in the realm of the intuitive.’ Rolf Tiedemann, “‘Dialectics at a Standstill’ Approaches to the Passagen-Werk”, (Trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere) in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Belknap Press, 1999, pp.929-945, p.941 and p.940. Paul Claydon discusses Benjamin’s use of ‘physiognomies’ in “‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’”, op. cit., pp.36-38.

48 Henry Flynt, *Depth Psychology as a Post-Scientific Modality: The Psychedelic State*, 1992, [http://www.henryflynt.org/depth\\_psy/psychostate.html](http://www.henryflynt.org/depth_psy/psychostate.html) quoted in Damian Abbott, ‘Extensive Bodies’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1, 2000, pp.117-131, p.122.

speculative building, approached the phenomena which had contributed to it: monumental planning which sought to contain and discipline the inhabitants of the inner city; privatisation, restructuring of public housing and financialisation leading to unbridled speculation on real estate. Following Bataille's lead, instead of reproducing the liberal moral-civilisational sentiment of Sennett's work *Inventory* subjected the putative harmony of 'flesh and stone' to a collision course with human subjects whose desires overran its limits. Architecture, planning and urbanism became for them the site of the study of discord and conflict in human society.





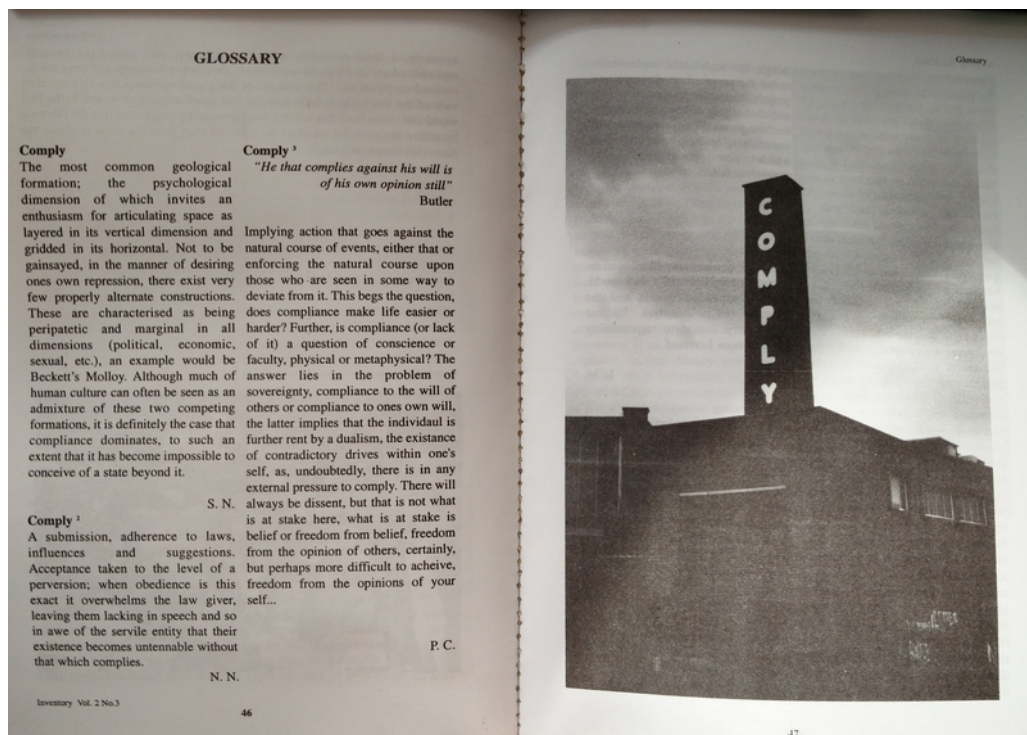
Image: Inventory, *Scream*, 2003





Image: Inventory, *Comply*, factory building in south London, undated. Published in *Total Uberzogen*, personal collection of Adam Scrivener





Images: Inventory, 'Comply' collage in *Cream*, London: Phaidon, 1999, p.205 and Various authors, 'Comply', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, pp.46–47 (print error in page footer pictured)

# Archetypes of Spatial Practice

In their studies of built space *Inventory* neither adopt a short term historical view, nor an anthropocentric one. Archetypes of spatial practice discussed in the journal in relation to urban space are drawn from modernity, the ancient as well as the animal world, physics and mathematics. This was paired with exploration of the late-20th century avant-garde tradition of psychogeography, the unpredictable wildness, heterogeneity and disorientation of city space, as a spur to formally and theoretically exploratory writing.<sup>49</sup> *Inventory* were ‘fiercely sociological’ in their studies of urban space, and as a consequence, drawing on Marxian theories of ‘the production of space’ (Henri Lefebvre) and ‘the practice of everyday life’ (Lefebvre and De Certeau), the journal and its contributors produced a remarkable series of urban studies of estates and modernist monolithic structures (Harlow New Town; Thamesmead Estate; Marquess Estate and Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre).<sup>50</sup> The group situate their own urban studies within a dynamic, contemporary context and, from a class perspective, focussed on attempts to rupture the contradictions of 20th century urbanism. That is, they grapple with the past inheritance and living remainder of 20th century modernism and modern urban planning. In studying specific sites, rather than the archetypes proposed by Hegel and Bataille, they admit not only the primacy of economics – recognising, as Jameson argues, of ‘all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic’ – but move some way beyond planning or architectural histories to develop their own unique form of ‘integrated histories of urban development’.<sup>51</sup>

49 See Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1998.

50 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Trans. Steven Rendall), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*. London; New York: Verso, 1991 and Henri Lefebvre, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*. (Ed.) Stuart Elden, (Trans. Eleonore Kofman), New York; London: Continuum, 2003.

The Marquess Estate also provided the material for an art work made by the group. *Inventory*, *Estate Map*, (Acrylic paint and marker pen on aluminium) 1999, acquired by the Tate Gallery in 2002. During the process of the Marquess Estate’s demolition a member of the group acquired the estate map of the former layout of the estate. Members of the group collectively wrote on the map over the course of some months. See also two entries by Nick Norton, Adam Scrivener, ‘Estate Map’ and ‘Estate Map<sup>2</sup>’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.15–17.

51 It is significant that Jameson poses this relationship specifically in the temporal context of postmodernism: ‘Of all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship. It will therefore not be surprising to find the extraordinary flowering of the new postmodern architecture grounded in the patronage of multinational business, whose expansion and development is strictly contemporaneous with it.’ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p.5. *Inventory*’s originality can be discerned if we follow historian Peter Mandler’s remarks that the clichéd and polarized views of the post-war period stem mostly from ‘planning histories rather than integrated histories of urban development’ which often serve either conservative ‘limits to growth critics’ or ‘pro-growth critics of 1960s vintage’. It is therefore most significant that *Inventory*’s urban studies focus keenly not just on planners’ projections but the legacy of these monumental schemes over the course of the 20th century as lived by their residents. Peter Mandler, ‘New Towns for Old: the Fate of the Town Centre, in Conekin, Becky, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (Eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*. London; New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1999, pp.208-227, p.209.

Commonly these studies propose the planned environment as a tool of social repression against which forms of unpredictable social behaviour, criminality and unauthorised writing constitute a disorganised and disorganising resistance. In this sense the many texts express a form of ‘desperate optimism’: pitting the inventive sensibilities of downtrodden urban populations against the myopic pragmatism of authoritarian forms of urban development and management of space.<sup>52</sup> The contested ground of ‘architecture’ and ‘planning’ forms a rich field of opinions and theories in the journal. The essays explore the relationships between modernism and the welfare state with great foresight and originality.

## Travelling Without Moving: the Ruins of Great Britain

The landscape of the UK in the late-1980s and early-1990s was markedly one of material decline. The modernist project lay in ruins in two specific senses: in terms of the material condition and legislative status of its built legacy and in the advance of the reactionary project of ‘postmodernism’ in theory and in architecture. I argue that these two currents reshaping the material and theoretical landscape of the UK coincided in the neoliberal project with which Margaret Thatcher self-consciously experimented during her position as UK Prime Minister (1979–1990). Thatcher’s Conservative Government, particularly during its first term and under the guidance of Keith Joseph the Secretary of State for Industry, intensified and accelerated the process of deindustrialisation underway in Britain since the late 1960s.<sup>53</sup> The financial sector boomed and industrial sectors creaked to a halt. This rapidly reshaped the landscape of the United Kingdom as industries broken-up purely for their assets to be reinvested, or streamlined under a rationalisation and layoffs, left industrial ruins and ruined the capacity to build or repair in their wake.<sup>54</sup> The spatial consequences

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52 These were themes explored in the group-authored art works as well as individually and group-authored essays published in the journal.

53 Three important films provide a critical commentary on aspects of the transition to Thatcherism which undermine aspects of the standard historiographical view of the period, (e.g. David Harvey’s), these are Dave Fox & Steve Sprung (Dir.), *Year of the Beaver*, Poster Film Collective, 1985 and Adam Curtis, *Inquiry: The Great British Housing Disaster*, BBC, 1984 and Black Audio Film Collective (Reece Auguste Dir.), *Twilight City*, 1989. By privatising nationalised industries, expanding a provision for the ‘right to buy’ council housing, de-regulating banking and passing anti-union legislation, Government policies shifted power and money away from an embedded industrial working class and empowered, by directing vast amounts of capital towards, financial markets in the form of both fixed capital (property, plant, infrastructure) and liquidity (pension funds, loans, liquidated assets, land sales). See also David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.22-23; p.161 and p.62.

54 Meanwhile those employed in now defunct industries, often living in the inner city and close to the ruins of their

of these processes were dramatic. As it gained the upper hand, the financial sector empowered by Government and the media, gradually enacted a transvaluation or 'revaluation of all values' that would shape the following decades.<sup>55</sup> Initially outside of the new and proliferating categories of financial asset all was ruin: former use values rotted and rusted, labour power was separated from production and variable capital (wages) were squeezed to a minimum and re-routed to seek higher rates of profit as finance capital. All that was solid (the welfare state, big industry, social institutions) melted... not exactly into air, but liquidated into money and became re-classified, often by a slow and invisible legal and administrative process, into exchange values.

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former workplaces, either saw immediate unemployment, fewer hours or wage cuts and the municipal councils governing where they lived under strain through cuts to their budgets for building, street maintenance, housing repairs and service provision.

55 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, (Ed. and Trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann), New York: Modern Library, 1968, p.46.



Image: Minoru Yamasaki, Pruitt-Igoe Housing, 1952-55 (destroyed 1972)



## Theory Founded on Anti-Social Ruins

Postmodern theory's complementarity with these economic processes has been increasingly noted. We can locate its roots in the anti-authoritarian currents of 1960s and link it with other movements such as deconstruction (in literature and architecture) and the phenomena of deindustrialisation.<sup>56</sup> Emphasising the individual and relative, postmodernism and post-structuralism had a far-reaching impact on many academic disciplines in the humanities and sciences. Responding to the historic force of architectural modernism, one current of postmodernism developed as a specifically architectural discourse coinciding with design practices, as theorised by Charles Jencks and Robert Stern, though originating as early as the 1950s in the practice of Italian architect and theorist Paulo Portoghesi.<sup>57</sup> Jencks theory championed 'radical eclecticism', presenting modernism as a restraint and opposing to it a 'freedom' for architects 'to try their hand at any style – ancient, modern, or hybrid.'<sup>58</sup> He framed this in an odd partnership of the terms 'inclusive building' and 'tragedy'.<sup>59</sup> Of course, Jenck's 'inclusive building' implies a form of exclusion to which building should respond. This was self-consciously, for Jencks, an opposition to the modern project's Promethean universalism, the idea that architects and states could 'build a better world' for all.

In *Inventory*'s urban studies, not least Adam Scrivener's study of transformations in the provision of public housing 'Open yet Excluded' (1999), the dyad inclusion/exclusion provides a lens through which to examine the forces – those of an unfolding social 'tragedy' – restructuring the city.<sup>60</sup> In

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56 Cf. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991; *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, op. cit., p.4 and p.47. See also, Loren Goldner, 'Deconstruction and deindustrialization: Ontological "difference" and the neoliberal war on the social', *Break Their Haughty Power*, January 21, 2001, available <http://thecharnelhouse.org>

57 The notable examples here are Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1977 and Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013. The case for Paulo Portoghesi's origination of both postmodern style and theory is given in Manfredo Tafuri, *History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989.

58 *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, op. cit., p.308.

59 In this sense, Jencks was consistent with Lyotard and Mackay's discussion of metaphysical 'tragedy', derived from Nietzsche (discussed in Chapter 3), but not with the Simmelian tragic proposed by *Inventory* as a response to these positions. 'The rare, inclusive building – as rare as the true tragedy (most are melodramas) – does not sublimate unattractive aspects of the world. It can include ugliness, decay, banality, austerity, without becoming depressing. It can confront harsh realities of climate or politics without suppression. It can articulate a bleak metaphysical view of man – Greek architecture and that of Le Corbusier – without either evasion or bleakness.' Ibid., p.309.

60 Adam Scrivener, 'Open Yet Excluded', op. cit. We can understand the Grenfell fire as the spectacular culmination of the social disaster which *Inventory* had begun to outline: of the managed decline, destruction by neglect and by design of social housing. As a report by Architects for Social Housing points out this is not a 'tragedy' at all but in fact a 'man-made disaster': 'A tragedy – which is how this fire is being described by politicians, councillors, the media and the contractors and consultants responsible for its deadly effects – is something that happens to someone as a consequence of their arrogance and greed. The residents of Grenfell Tower may have died because they were

Jenck's account inclusion was not necessarily opposed to poverty or material decline – in fact it celebrated ruins, particularly the ruination of ambitious projects intended to meet housing need.<sup>61</sup> Postmodernism intended to incorporate ruination, even maximise and manage it, rather than expel, alleviate or annul it.

## The End of Progress

Jenks, Portoghesi and other theorists of architectural postmodernism railed against the 'ideology of progress'.<sup>62</sup> This was reflected stylistically in the kitsch elements of 'classicism' and ruination incorporated in postmodern architecture; structurally in the short-termism of building materials and standards employed in the construction of its edifices; and in the short-termism underpinning these building projects (the London Docklands providing the best example in the UK), an emerging, and

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poor, as has widely been claimed, but it wasn't their poverty that killed them. The fire that consumed their homes and lives is not a tragedy but a man-made disaster that should never have happened. Unlike a tragedy, the victims of this fire are entirely innocent of the disaster they foresaw. It remains to be seen whether those whose arrogance and greed caused it will be held to account. But it is up to us to ensure that such a disaster never happens again, and that the political decisions, management structures and technical conditions that led to the fire are not ignored and suppressed as they were eight years ago after the Lakanal House fire.' Geraldine Denning and Simon Elmer, 'The Truth about Grenfell Tower: A report by Architects for Social Housing', 2017, <<https://architectsfor-social-housing.wordpress.com/2017/07/21/the-truth-about-grenfell-tower-a-report-by-architects-for-social-housing/>> [Accessed 7 January 2019] p.47.

- 61 Jencks' chapter on the 'Death of Modernism' famously opens with a 'Modern architecture died in St Louis Missouri on 15 July, 1972 at 3:32pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks were given the *coup de grace* by dynamite. *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, *op. cit.* p.8. Jencks' contribution to the gradual chipping away at the architecture of social provision was to stage, in cahoots with architecture critic Paul Goldberger, a mugging at RHG in order to falsify his own class-inflected arguments, to slur a key symbol of the 'class architecture' which have hitherto reminded us through three decades of postmodernism and the destruction of the welfare state, that things could be otherwise. In the same book chapter, 'The Death of Modern Architecture', Jencks argues that the ruins of the ambitious post-war architecture of social provision, 'should be kept', 'Like a folly or artificial ruin – constructed on the estate of an eighteenth-century English eccentric'. Jencks' proposal that we should both 'romp through the desolation of modern architecture and the destruction of our cities' and preserve them as 'follies or artificial ruins' was recently realised in the Victoria & Albert Museum's decision to preserve a fragment of the demolished concrete structure of RHG and later display it at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale. This represents neither a homage to the architecture of Peter and Alison Smithson, nor an urgent conversation about social housing, but rather a continuation of the burial of modernism and the denigration of not just modernist experiments but also the progressive experiments of the welfare state. 'Here is a symbolic distillation of the truth of middle-class Brutalism, the usurping of working-class housing for middle-class pleasure. But the acquisition serves also to symbolically cleanse the social violence of demolition, by lifting the estate – and by association the social and aesthetic form of modernist council housing – out of its crisis in the present and into the sealed and sanitized past of a museum artifact.' Nicholas Thoburn, 'Concrete and Council Housing: The Class Architecture of Brutalism "As Found" at Robin Hood Gardens', *City*, 2018, pp.1-21, p.9.
- 62 Manfredo Tafuri writes, 'Portoghesi gathers almost all the motifs that have been floating about in the international architectural and philosophical debate of recent decades. His theoretical system accommodates a broad spectrum of issues: a critique of the linear concept of history, a reflection upon memory, the need for a new nonmetaphysical statute for truth, the emergence of new demands for identity and what can be imagined, the demand for peripheral identities, the cult of roots, and the explosion of ephemeral hedonisms.' Manfredo Tafuri, "'Gay errancy": Hypermoderns (postmoderns)', in *History of Italian Architecture, 1944-1985*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989. Available, <https://thechamelhouse.org/2013/04/08/gay-errancy-hypermoderns-postmoderns/> [Accessed 17 January, 2019]

soon to intensify, cycle of 'boom and bust' which had typified the initial rise of finance capital in the 1920s.<sup>63</sup>

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63 In 1987 on 'Black Monday' stock markets around the world crashed, this led in 1989 to the crash of the UK property market, by 1992 Canary Wharf Estate declared bankruptcy. See *Ground Control*, op. cit., p.12.

Here architectural critic Paul Goldberger mimes a mugger's threatening gesture — commonplace in these corridors.



Image: Architectural critic Paul Goldberger stages a mugging with Charles Jenks at Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens estate in a page from Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, (1977)

The end of ‘master narratives’ of progress, in favour of the affirmation of non-linear time, collage, flexibility (‘radical eclecticism’) and the turn to language argued for in postmodern theory, turns out retrospectively to have been entangled in, and legitimating of, the sequence of changes which directed social wealth towards finance and rebalanced class power in favour of the rich. Indeed, Jameson contends that it is ‘finance capital which underpins and sustains postmodernity as such.’<sup>64</sup> These economic and cultural changes encouraged the increasing detachment of the economic basis for this aesthetic and political transformation from the needs of those whose lives it autonomised, ‘as it accelerated its mutation into its increasingly fictive form, seemingly detached from any relationship to production or reproduction.’<sup>65</sup>

## The Project of Postmodernism

The exclusion the ‘postmodern’ project would exploit was the breakdown of the social democratic state under Thatcher and Reagan which resulted in the imposition of austerity on a *formerly working* class and a rebalance of class power in favour of the re-empowerment of an emerging global ruling class. In London this is built into the symbolic apparition of a comprehensive concentration of postmodern architecture in the London Docklands, formerly consisting primarily of docks and warehouses comprising the Port of London. An unprecedented collaboration between Margaret Thatcher’s government and private initiatives in the 1980s produced a new form of entirely private space, governed not by transparent municipal councils, nor regulated by planning law, but solely managed by its corporate owners.<sup>66</sup> The London Docklands was an experiment that, despite its initial financial failure, provided the model for new forms of spatial production and governance which were to become hegemonic.<sup>67</sup> For Anna Minton, whose influential account attempts to recover the processes behind the disappearance of public space in the UK in the post-war period, the London Docklands was the apogee of a whole series of projects which were the architectural corollary to a process which ‘established the physical, technological and regulatory

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64 Fredric Jameson, ‘Culture and Finance Capital’. In *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*, London: Verso, 2000, pp.136-161, p.149.

65 Loren Goldner, ‘Deconstruction and Deindustrialization: Ontological “Difference” and the Neoliberal War on the Social’, *Break Their Haughty Power*, January 2001 via <http://thecharnelhouse.org> [Accessed October, 2016]

66 On the governmental formation of the London Docklands see Anna Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First-Century City*. London; New York: Penguin Books, (2009), 2012, pp.10-12.

67 Effectively, at Docklands, a one-off monumental process of state-led primitive accumulation created a gated private island with strong international financial connections and its own airport and transport links where a spree of loosely coordinated private commercial and residential developments produced an architectural melange of classically derived motifs subsisted with modernist quotations and contemporary building technologies.

framework for an unfettered financial services industry in the UK, to replace the failing industrial economy.’<sup>68</sup> In the late-1990s and 2000 such experiments were to be further integrated into a union between the new financial infrastructures developed under the climate of deregulation and State investment in infrastructure for public service provision – seeing hospitals, schools, roads, bridges and prisons built and managed by private companies on behalf of the State, and rented to the State by private enterprise in perpetuity.<sup>69</sup> This now-established form of *progress as regress* was in development as *Inventory* began their investigation of the city, but it drew sustenance from philosophical debates and cultural movements which had taken hold in the preceding decades.

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68 Ibid., Minton, p.5.

69 On the centrality of Private Finance Initiative schemes (PFI) to UK public infrastructure projects in the 1990s and 2000s see Rob Ray, ‘The 3 P’s – PFI, Private Equity, and Pensions’, August 2007, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/3-ps-%E2%88%92-pfi-private-equity-and-pensions> [Accessed 21 September, 2016]; (Inventory member) Damian Abbott, ‘The Spine’, 5 December 2007, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/spine> [Accessed 21 September, 2016] and Owen Hatherley, *A Guide to the Ruins of Great Britain*, London: Verso Book, 2010.



Image: MacCormac Jamieson Prichard & Wright for the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC),  
Newlands Quay, Maynards Quay and Peartree Lane developments, Shadwell Basin, 1986-1988



# Inventory's Urban Studies

Traces of the outlines of Dockland as a project are to be found in Keith Miller's essay on the east end, 'East of Eden' (1996) and in Damian Abbott's essay on plans for the 'Celebrating the Millenium' in North Greenwich (1996), the spectre of postmodernism as a cultural theory is addressed in passing references I have highlighted throughout the journal but really is only fully grasped through the reconstruction of the entire journal as a critical project.<sup>70</sup> The theoretical landscape into which *Inventory* intervened was by post-structuralism as much as the built environment had been restructured by neoliberal policies of deindustrialisation and privatisation. This is especially evident in the early essay, 'Elephant' (1995), by Adam Scrivener. The essay makes a series of evaluations, qualifications and criticisms of existing post-structuralist thinking of space and consumption and attempts to transform these through close attention to a specific site. Whilst in this chapter I emphasise the qualitative differences which *Inventory* made as a step outside certain traps of postmodern discourse, it is worth retaining in view how elements of this zeitgeist touched them. The group were not opposed to certain 'ephemeral hedonisms' and a fascination with the marginal and 'peripheral'.<sup>71</sup> What distinguished them from these currents though, consistent with the joint influence of both Bataille's circle and the Frankfurt School, was an acute attention to the 'history' of apparatuses of homogenisation such as the shopping centre and estate and rigorous opposition to 'identity-thinking' – in *Inventory* contributor, Simon Neville's words – 'the return, therefore, of a difference that would escape the solipsistic games of identity'.<sup>72</sup> The theory they deployed and developed was neither professional in the sense that architectural discourse was, nor academic. It was embedded in quite distinct production conditions and aimed at another mode of distribution and circulation. Building the object, *Inventory* – a kind of collaborative and collective encyclopedia and repository of experiences and knowledges – meant drawing on all kinds of sources: local history archives, graffiti, theory, subjective experience of streets and spaces, and to some extent returning the sum of these experiences and knowledges to the street (not least by flyposting and making speeches or other performances of their work in situ), or at least remaining

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70 Damian Abbott, 'Celebrating the Millenium', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.74–82. Postmodernism is discussed at length in 'Elephant' op. cit.

71 "'Gay errancy'", op. cit.

72 Simon Neville, 'The Redemption of Accidents', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.22–34, p.25. In 'Elephant' Adam Scrivener mounts an argument against glib statements of powerlessness in the face of capital: 'I do not wish to take the shopping centre as an abstraction', emphasising that the Elephant has 'histories: a history in terms of the shopping centre within the development of retailing practices, and local histories as well.' (p.24). 'So, although space is produced in the form of capital (private property etc) this does not mean that, at each historical moment, space contains (produces) one set of meanings. It is an interrelationship of constructed environment, geographic form, symbolic meanings and everyday practices. It is a contested ground [...]' p.21.

true to some direct experience of it.<sup>73</sup> *Inventory* as a project, broadly contested homogeneity, yet admitted that the capitalist city ‘renders a true heterogeneity impossible.’<sup>74</sup> This meant contesting homogeneity by design and contesting homogeneity in theory, each construct urban space and determine what life in urban space might be understood to be.

There is a need, therefore, to express the notion of the city in conjunction or opposition to our selves, not on a personal everyday level but as an abstraction; the city as an organism, organic and inorganic: Flesh and stone... From this premise [...] appear new constellations, new organisations of personal space; routes through the city become scars, the street plan an intricate web of tattoos, the underground an infinite intestinal tract. This watershed of subjectivity allows for an uninhibited play across the urban chequer board.<sup>75</sup>

*Inventory* never purported to be disengaged objective researchers of urban space, rather their method implied passionate, subjective and physical engagement. The maxim, chiselled into the stone of Karl Marx’s tomb in Highgate London,<sup>76</sup> perhaps best characterises *Inventory*’s attitude to the city, it was not only necessary to interpret the city, but to change it. One vector towards changing it would be via interpretation, challenging and interfering with classification systems, another by direct intervention in the city bringing those categorical interferences into the street. Underpinning the critique of the rigidity and structure of architecture and concepts is the notion that forms of bodily investment could test and exceed both: in Damian Abbott’s words, the ‘liberating acknowledgement that the attempt to engage with the world is foremost to describe the limits of description.’<sup>77</sup> Personal experiences informed choices of sites, but analysis of the city also meant to confront oneself and the city as ‘abstraction[s]’ and living flesh, involving the binding of the personal – personal associations with sites, subjective experience of them – to the abstract view: oneself as ‘worker’, ‘human’ etc. and the city as a totality – as combination of ‘organic and inorganic’ elements – ‘ensembles’ through which to understand the city and oneself as subject and object.

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73 Paul Claydon remarks admiringly ‘Benjamin plucked his categories from street level and re-employed them in the form of a dialectically transformed and politically informed indictment of capitalist production.’ ‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’, p.43.

74 ‘Botanizing on the Asphalt’, op. cit., p.47.

75 Paul Claydon, ‘Flesh and Stone’, *Glossary*, *Inventory* Vol.2 No.3, 1999, p.48.

76 ‘[p]hilosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it.’ The source for this famous quotation is Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1982, p.123.

77 Damian Abbott, ‘Extensive Bodies’, *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1, 2000, pp.117-131, p.127.



Image: The Elephant & Castle in Patrick Keiller, *London*, 1994 (film still)

# The Problem of London

The three editors of *Inventory* journal and core members of *Inventory* moved to London during a period in which spaces in which to make and display autonomous art were contracting and becoming closely embroiled in the dilapidation, destruction and reconstruction of the material fabric of the city.<sup>78</sup> The transformations sketched above characterises a landscape which was, in the process of making the journal, to become both reconstructed and reflected upon by them. The sites *Inventory* engaged with were the nexus of personal relations, inhabitation, travel to and from work.<sup>79</sup> I argue that the city shaped and was shaped by their abilities, material resources, experience of housing and homelessness and conditions of employment.

For *Inventory* editor Adam Scrivener, the artwork *Estate Map* (1999) was a ludic side project to the research for his essay on the Marquess Estate, 'Open Yet Excluded' (1999).<sup>80</sup> On his journeys along Essex Road past the estate on his way to work Scrivener was afforded a daily view of the redevelopment of the estate. When he noticed the redundant estate map was being removed he approached the builders and carried the sign home to his nearby flat where it stood in his room for several months. Over several sessions members of *Inventory* editors and contributors wrote over the already weathered sign inscribing the two texts included in the aforementioned glossary entry. The privatisation and demolition of state housing and poor state and provision of both private and public housing in London effected the lives of every *Inventory* member.<sup>81</sup> London's dilapidation, was seemingly the outcome of the mistakes of the post-war planner-state, but as we shall see *Inventory's* study complexify this explanation.<sup>82</sup>

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78 An aspect of the rise of certain forms of art I approached in the introductory essay to Slater, Josephine Berry, and Anthony Iles. *No Room to Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City*, 2010, pp.6-56.

79 e.g. Adam Scrivener lived near Elephant & Castle in the early-1990s and his essay arose out of the daily encounters with it as a shopper and pedestrian, see 'Elephant', op. cit., FN #25. Scrivener later travelled to work daily from his home in Dalston along Essex Road one of the 'perimeters' bordering the Marquess Estate, the site examined in Adam Scrivener, 'Open yet Excluded', op. cit. This was also to provide the premise for the essay 'Travelling without Moving', *Travelling Without Moving*, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.20-23 Adam Scrivener in conversation August, 2016. Damian Abbott grew up and lived near the Thamesmead Estate, the subject of Damian Abbott, 'Every Stage of Thamesmead Knows it', op. cit. and an adjoining Woolwich, Plumstead, North Greenwich and Beckton – areas discussed in Damian Abbott, 'Celebrating the Millenium', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.74-82. Damian Abbott in conversation 2009-2010.

80 Adam Scrivener, 'Open Yet Excluded', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.78-91,

81 All three of whom experienced periods homelessness during the production of the journal. Damian Abbott in conversation circa 2009 and Adam Scrivener in conversation August 2016.

82 Which had in equal measure expelled, contained and disciplined the city's working class through post-war urban policy – the subsequent demolition of a great deal of this public housing in the late-1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and the re-inflation of the private housing market – on the back the scarcity derived from the destruction of so much housing

One of the resources *Inventory* drew upon to approach the ‘problem of London’ was the work of one of their tutors at Middlesex University, filmmaker and writer Patrick Keiller. A notable proponent of the essay film, Keiller has explored themes of the production of space, housing, modern experience and everyday life in urban and rural Britain. His first successful feature, *London*, contrived to explore the ‘problem of London’ (1994).<sup>83</sup> Drawing on the ‘urban literature’ of Charles Baudelaire, Guillaume Apollinaire, Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin and others, ‘London appeared to be a city where certain kinds of urban experience that one might see as characteristic of European cities were difficult, if not impossible, to find.’<sup>84</sup> *London* initiated a trilogy of three films which explored the transforming English landscape from the post-Thatcher 1990s through to the post-financial crisis late-2000s.<sup>85</sup> Each of the films labour under the sign of the question, posed by Ellen Melskins Wood, of whether Britain is ‘a peculiar capitalism or is it peculiarly capitalist?’.<sup>86</sup> Keiller’s oeuvre thus situated the peculiarity, even surreality, of the British landscape, within the peculiarity of British capitalism. Ostensibly an image of material and cultural decline, but one in which profits and disparity between rich and poor grow exponentially. The influence over *Inventory* is evident not only in the journal’s critical attitude to contemporary capitalism, eye for the familiar strangeness of the UK’s environment but also in the attention to the history of the country’s exceptional construal of sovereignty. Discussing London in the 1990s Keiller speaks of ‘various ‘declinist’ scenarios of English capitalism, in particular the idea that England is a backward, failing economy because it has never had a successful bourgeois revolution, and that the City of London’s dominance and priorities reinforce this failure.’<sup>87</sup> For Keiller, these were the structural problems behind the ‘problematic nature of so many aspects of English visual and material culture’ including ‘the UK’s attitude to public space and cities; its apparent inability to produce adequately designed buildings, cars and other consumer goods; its unattractive food and problems with agriculture; the

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stock –came to occupy an increasingly central role in the UK economy in the late-1980s, and again in the 1990s and 2000s. *Inventory*’s core editors each moved from outside London to the inner city in the 1980s. The sheer economic devastation under Thatcher’s government during had resulted a dramatic financial, social and demographic decline, driving the population levels in inner London in the decade between 1980-1990 to the lowest in the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. The figures for 1981 (2,425,534) and 1991 (2,625,245) represent the lowest population for any decade in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including during the height of the blitz and wartime evacuation. London’s population had effectively been in decline since 1939, a decline it has only just, in 2015, managed to recover from. Nonetheless the decade 1980-1990 represents an unprecedented dip. Data from Office for National Statistics, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography\\_of\\_London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography_of_London)> [Accessed 15 September, 2016].

83 *London* features several views of the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre. A short segment discusses the demolition of pre-fab housing close to Elephant & Castle. Patrick Keiller, *London*, Channel Four Films, 1994.

84 Such as William Defoe, Alexander Herzen, Henri Lefebvre, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Rimbaud and Raoul Vaneigem. This is to say that measured against this critical tradition (which *Inventory* also drew upon extensively), ‘the problem of London seemed to be, in essence, that it wasn’t Paris.’ ‘London in the Early 1990s’, in *The View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes*. Verso, 2013, pp.85-96, p.88 and p.86.

85 The Trilogy consists of *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010).

86 Ellen Melskins Wood quoted in ‘London in the Early 1990s’, op. cit., p.93.

87 ‘London in the Early 1990s’, p.88.

predicament of public services like education and transport; and a whole range of other features of everyday life that might be seen as consequences of *laissez-faire*'.<sup>88</sup> These are sets of phenomena *Inventory's* fierce sociology would explore and bring to light.

## Open Yet Excluded

The articles I group as *Inventory's* urban studies examine the legacy of post-war British urbanism, the dream image projected by its planners and architects, and the tension between planning and actual social inhabitation, use and misuse. *Inventory's* work around this field troubles Jenck's earlier characterisation of postmodernism as 'inclusive', showing instead inclusion and exclusion to be, not merely a question of design approach, but poles of a relation mutually constitutive of a position of power and logic of governmentality.

Adam Scrivener's 'Open Yet Excluded', studies a specific phase in the history of a single housing estate in Islington – the Marquess Estate's redevelopment – which anticipated a common approach to the management and demolition or redevelopment of such estates pioneered in the 1990s.<sup>89</sup> The original 1970s design of the estate already presents a softening of modernist architectural principles, and an attempt to respond to, 'include' and manage the existing income disparities in the locality. Damian Abbott's study of the monumental post-war planning project which brought about the Thamesmead Estate, is more straightforwardly a study of modernist alienation and the inability of the state-led plan to include the recalcitrant energies and needs of the populations it housed.<sup>90</sup> Michael Ricketts study of Harlow New Town (1997), also involves examination of a monolithic post-war plan, but one planned with a far greater, yet still paternalistic, sensitivity to place, landscape, spirituality and culture than either Thamesmead or the Marquess.<sup>91</sup>

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88 Ibid., p.88.

89 Since the 1990s this approach generalised and intensified as a real estate bubble boosted by the invention and trading of new 'credit derivatives' on world markets expanded to epic proportions throughout the 2000s and drove a climate of property and land speculation in London caught up within a global real estate bubble which burst to dramatic effect in 2007/2008. Yet, despite the collapse of global real estate values, the bubble in London swiftly reinflated and continued to grow again throughout the 2010s, to even greater heights. On the origins of this crisis see Gillian Tett, 'Elaborate debt deals spread risk but distort the data', 14 January, 2007, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1/d09dbf32-a3f1-11db-bec4-0000779e2340.html#axzz4LTVULKaP>> [Accessed 10 March, 2017]

90 Damian Abbott, 'Every Stage of Thamesmead Knows it', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.83–90.

91 Michael Ricketts, 'Harlow', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.41-70. In 1962 in the face of considerable criticism Francis Gibberd, Harlow's Master Planner, argued for an English urbanism which 'prefers segregation of home and work, which enjoys open-air exercise, which has an innate love of nature, which makes use of motor transport and

# The Production of Space

Marxist urbanist Henri Lefebvre, was an important point of reference for *Inventory*.<sup>92</sup> As Adam Scrivener writes in the first issue of *Inventory* (1995):

Henri Lefebvre puts forward a critique of our long held assumptions about space. Space is not merely a neutral, abstract container in which life occurs. It is not simply handed to us from nature or simply determined by the abstract laws of geometry. Space is produced, shaped by the interests of power, classes, experts, planners, etc. It is produced and reproduced through human intention and is the site and manifestation of social, political and economic struggle.<sup>93</sup>

In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre proposes a distinction between ‘abstract space’ and ‘differential space’. Abstract space is capitalist space, that which facilitates the circulation of commodities and workers.

Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the ‘world of commodities’, its ‘logic’ and its worldwide strategies as well as the power of money and that of the political state. This space is founded on the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices. Within this space the town – once the forcing-house of accumulation, fountainhead of wealth and centre of historical space – has disintegrated.<sup>94</sup>

This perspective on the spaces of circulation of money, information and workers is supported in

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which, although demanding privacy for the individual family, likes some measure of community life.’ ‘Design Problems in New Towns. Result of Building “for all classes”’, *The Times*, 6 February 1962, quoted in ‘Harlow: “Sculpture Town”’, <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2017/05/23/harlow-sculpture-town/> [Accessed 7 January, 2019]

92 Though not assessed here as a source for *Inventory*’s name, there is a Lefebvre text entitled ‘The Inventory’. Henri Lefebvre, ‘The Inventory’ (from *La Somme et le reste* (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1989 [1959], pp.642-55), English translation available Henri Lefebvre, and Elizabeth Lebas, *Henri Lefebvre: Key Writings*, Ed. Stuart Elden, Trans. Eleonore Kofman, New York; London: Continuum, 2003, pp.166-176. A passage from Lefebvre’s *Production of Space*, (a book cited extensively by *Inventory* editor Adam Scrivener) is strongly suggestive of the investigation undertaken in *Inventory* journal. ‘The commodity is a social “being-there”, an “object” irreducible to the philosophical concept of the Object. The commodity hides in stores, in warehouses – in inventory. Yet it has no mystery comparable to the mystery of nature. The enigma of the commodity is entirely social. It is the enigma of money and property, of specific needs and the demand-money-satisfaction cycle. The commodity asks for nothing better than to appear. And appear it does – visible/readable, in shop windows and on display racks. Self-exhibition is its forte.’ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, op. cit., p.340.

93 Adam Scrivener, ‘Elephant’, *Inventory*, Vol.1, No.1, 1995, pp.19-38, p.21.

94 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991, p.53.



several texts throughout *Inventory*. In an essay on commuting Adam Scrivener writes, '[t]he spatial organisation of the city manipulates us, the city produces its own space founded on a restricted economy of rational production.'<sup>95</sup> In a Glossary entry on 'Fare Dodging', Damian Abbott, advocating for a campaign of avoidance of payment on London's transport system, proposes that 'Travel, movement is an essential aspect of a capitalist society. Money itself is a form in which information is passed on, moved from place to place. [...] If people cannot travel, they cannot work.'<sup>96</sup> This is again supported by Scrivener, '[c]ommuting, the walk from the home or the train or bus stop to the work place becomes exemplary of the programmatic administrative circuits of restricted economy governed as it is by productive forces and a belief in progress.'<sup>97</sup> The Glossary entry goes on to explore the homology between circulation of money and of information, remarking on a never-realised plan for the UK State to collect tax revenue based on internet users' downloads. In the end the article appears to express a contradictory position: advocating both for free travel and free downloading of digital goods, yet concluding that since capitalism requires circulation, 'Stasis is the only form of resistance'.<sup>98</sup> These contradictions were also inscribed in the contours of many of the social movements which gained prominence in the late-1990s and 2000s.<sup>99</sup> It is my contention that the the social questions which *Inventory* opened up in their writing in and of the margins of capitalist society resulted from the apparent shift towards circulation and space as a terrain of struggle produced by dramatic changes in capitalist strategies of accumulation in the post-war period. This can be understood as an 'economic reorganization from the sphere of production into that of circulation.'<sup>100</sup> As we shall see this shift offered possibilities for resistance which were contradictory and never entirely resolved in practice, yet continue to be intensely debated today.<sup>101</sup>

For Lefebvre, the production of abstract space had dominated the post-war reconstruction, and was , by the early-1970s, reaching its apogee. However, in his account, 'abstract space harbours specific

95 Adam Scrivener, 'Travelling Without Walking', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.20–23, p.21 .

96 Damian Abbott, 'Fare Dodging', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.48-49, p.49. So-called 'self-reduction' strategies such as fare dodging were much discussed on the left in this period as the legacies of Italian social movements of the 1970s came to prominence through the popularity of figures such as Antonio Negri and Frank 'Bifo' Berardi in the early-2000s. John Eden provides a history of these tendencies towards 'self-reduction' within the fringes of Italian Marxism and youth movements known as the 'area of autonomia' and their take-up within the UK punk movement. John Eden, 'Punk and Autonomia', N.D., <http://www.uncarved.org/music/apunk/autonomia.html>

97 'Travelling Without Walking', op. cit., pp.22–23.

98 Ibid., p.49.

99 Some examples of such movements are Reclaim the Streets, the anti-copyright and free software movement and the anti-globalisation movement, each was placed in the position of negating capitalist controls on borders and circulation (of traffic, of people, of digital goods) and affirming others (supporting environmental controls, trade protection for farmers, net neutrality and so on).

100 Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.: The New Era of Uprisings*, London and New York: Verso, 2016, p.22.

101 Joshua Clover's thesis of the primacy of the riot form in post-1973 struggles and 'circulation struggles' is discussed in Chapter 4, Ibid.

contradictions'.<sup>102</sup> In Lefebvre's work these contradictions obey a formal logic very much like that of the capital-labour relation itself – labour required by capital to produce products is 'from capital's viewpoint a barrier to be overcome' – just as areas of cities or country used unproductively for the reproduction (leisure, housing or consumption, education) of workers appear as mere 'spatial limits' to be overcome by capital's increasing need to manage and model space in its image.<sup>103</sup> For Lefebvre, 'differential space' exists almost by virtue of capitalism's fundamental contradiction, it cannot ever completely expel the living element on which it depends.<sup>104</sup> Lefebvre's theory, of lived 'differential space' as opposed to utilitarian, circulatory and consumptive 'abstract space', would provide *Inventory* with the dialectical bedrock for their 'fiercely sociological' urban studies.<sup>105</sup>

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102 Ibid., p.52.

103 'The more production comes to rest on exchange value, hence on exchange, the more important do the physical conditions of exchange – the means of communication and transport – become for the costs of circulation. Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it. Only in so far as the direct product can be realized in distant markets in mass quantities in proportion to reductions in the transport costs, and only in so far as at the same time the means of communication and transport themselves can yield spheres of realization for labour, driven by capital; only in so far as commercial traffic takes place in massive volume – in which more than necessary labour is replaced – only to that extent is the production of cheap means of communication and transport a condition for production based on capital, and promoted by it *for that reason*. All labour required in order to throw the finished product into circulation – it is in economic circulation only when it is present on the market – is from capital's viewpoint a barrier to be overcome – as is all labour required as a *condition* for the production process (thus e.g. expenses for the security of exchange etc.).' Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, (Chapter 10), available, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch10.htm>

104 'The reproduction of the social relations of production within this space inevitably obeys two tendencies: the dissolution of old relations on the one hand and the generation of new relations on the other. Thus, despite – or rather because of – its negativity, abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space 'differential space', because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences. It will also restore unity to what abstract space breaks up – to the functions, elements and moments of social practice.' Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space*. Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991, p.52.

105 Henri Lefebvre began professional life as a philosopher teaching in French *Lycees* (secondary school). He published his influential book *Dialectical Materialism* in 1939. A French Communist Party member he was one of a number of heterodox Marxists (e.g. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Siegfried Kracauer) to adopt sociology as a discipline with the onset of Cold War politics in the Post-World War II period. Michael Kelly, 'Henri Lefebvre, 1901-1991', *Radical Philosophy*, No.60, Spring 1992.

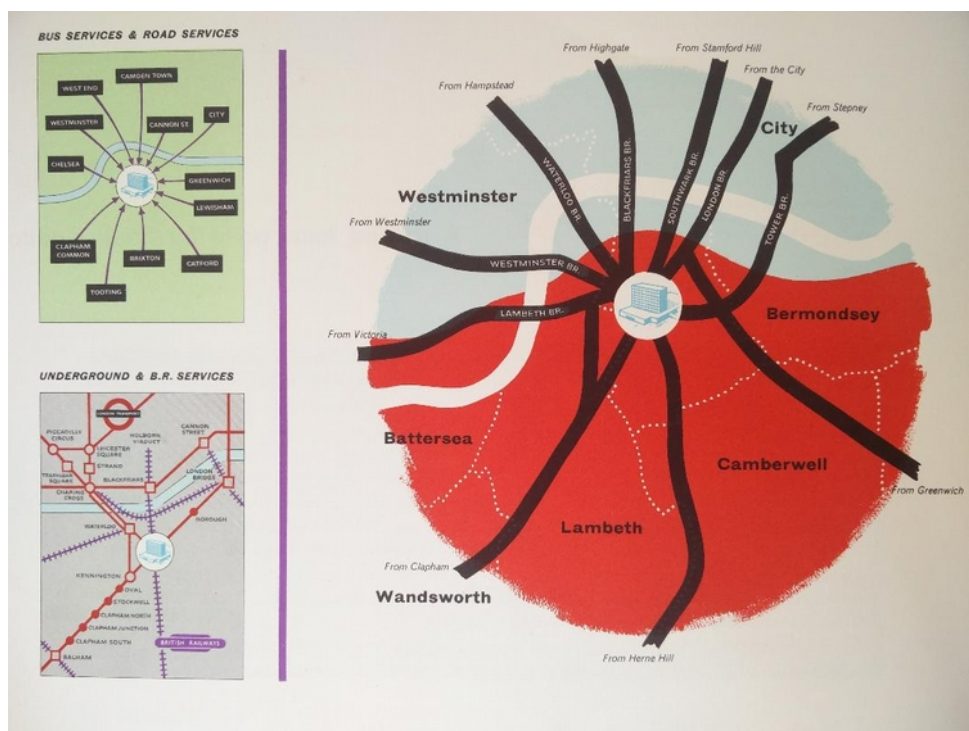


Image:(above) Slide from an undated presentation by *Inventory on the Elephant* (below) Southwark Council promotional leaflet about the Elephant & Castle development, c.1965

# The Elephant in the Streets

In distinction to the functionalist interdisciplinarity that characterises professional urban studies<sup>106</sup>, *Inventory* began their urban studies from the premise that built space is the locus of social dynamics structured by fundamental social conflicts. Describing his approach to Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre (1965), an American-style covered shopping mall (the first of its kind to be built in Europe),<sup>107</sup> Adam Scrivener explains:

The shopping centre is perceived as one of the main sites of our post-modern urban experience of a simulated hyper-reality where we wander dazzled by the overarching order of the spectacle. But there is a flaw to these interpretations [...].<sup>108</sup>

The flaw is that this smoothness on one side and passivity on another is simply a (post)modern myth. The characterisation of ‘post-modern urban experience’ in the shopping centre as one of ‘total commodification’ loosed from discrepancy or dissent, is harshly countered by Scrivener’s focus on history, materiality and everyday practices which produce an account of the specificity of ‘Elephant’. Elephant & Castle is indeed a ‘concrete space’ in more than one sense, Scrivener, working it through Lefebvre’s categories of ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ space, produces a picture of the clash between these modes of producing space which renders the shopping centre a ‘contested ground’.<sup>109</sup>

For some time now I have been researching a history of the centre and unlike analyses that would take such a site as an abstraction, a sign of capital’s rational, I would rather see Elephant [...] not just as an abstract form displaying general characteristics, the rational[e] [sic] of a spectacular capitalism, but as a space subjected to brutal symbolic

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106 An approach typified by the following statement from Yale University’s Urban Studies Department, ‘Urban Studies is the attempt to understand cities and city life. An interdisciplinary program of study, it encompasses the political institutions, economic and social relations, physical landscapes, and cultural frameworks that constitute the city. Using the conceptual tools supplied by architecture, sociology, art history, anthropology, environmental studies, economics, history, literature, and political science, urban studies both focuses on cities as distinctive entities and explores the meaning and function of cities in the larger society. Urban studies also examines the processes that produce certain patterns of human settlement and charts the changing relationships among areas shaped by urbanization, such as metropolis and countryside, city and suburb, and municipality and region.’ <http://urbanstudies.yale.edu/>

107 The shopping centre, designed by Boissevain & Osmond for the Willets Group, was opened in March 1965. It was the first covered shopping mall in Europe, the Heygate Estate immediately to the south of the shopping centre was completed in 1974.

108 ‘Elephant’, op. cit., p.19.

109 Ibid. p.21.

violence.<sup>110</sup>

The ‘brutal symbolic violence’, Scrivener describes, is constituted through a fine-grained history of the shopping centre itself: from the original sites’ destruction ‘built on the debris and rubble of local industry’; to its ‘poor post-war planning’ and imagination as the ‘Piccadilly Circus of South London’, to various face-lifts in 1970 and subsequent remodelling in 1990.<sup>111</sup> In the history plotted, Scrivener emphasises how gradually ‘the centre and its description have parted company’ and despite the successive changes of management, the hopes for a ‘utopian palace of consumption’ have failed, allowing ‘a slower, more germ-like process to alter its image until, in the end, the centre had to give up all resistance.’<sup>112</sup> The castle’s moat could not repel this invader – everyday life.’<sup>113</sup> Scrivener presents a picture in which the shopping centre has failed as an ‘economic space’, thus allowing it to be altered and transformed by other forces. ‘Life’ here is characterised as an undifferentiated essence which produces a form of space ‘that does not conform nor can be categorised’.<sup>114</sup> This is a theme which arises again and again in *Inventory*’s work that I shall discuss later in this chapter isolate as one problematic aspect of the synthetic analysis offered by *Inventory*’s urban studies. Engagement with Benjamin’s *Arcades* project initially guides this orientation towards sites of anachronistic consumption, but *Inventory*’s Lefebvrian method is developed as something that complements and extends their more fundamental methods by updating Benjamin’s study of the survivals of Paris of the 19th Century and orienting its themes towards the now ailing legacies of post-war modernism.

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110 Ibid., p.27.

111 Southwark Council quoted in Ibid., p.29. This was as I have noted above and discuss below to only anticipate a whole ‘brutal’ new episode in the late 1990s when Southwark Council were to begin to work with developers towards destroying the shopping centre and much of the surrounding public housing.

112 Ibid., p.27.

113 ‘Elephant’, op. cit., p.30. Everyday life is the subject of some detailed qualifications in Scrivener’s essay, engaging the theories of Michel de Certeau, Lefebvre and Baudrillard he ultimately criticises de Certeau’s ‘militaristic metaphors’ and Baudrillard’s ‘complete homogenisation’ (pp.24) as false totalisations and insists on a much more granular view of how class and power interact, in particular see pp.22–24.

114 Ibid., p.33.



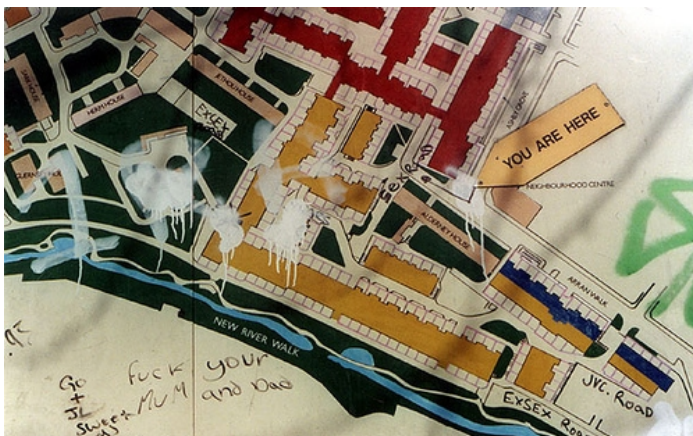


Image: (top centre) The Marquess Estate Islington designed by Darbourne and Darke for Islington Council, 1976.  
 (bottom right) Estate map of the Marquess Estate and (bottom left) detail of Estate map of the Marquess Estate with graffiti, c.1990s

# From Residence to Property

Passing from shopping to housing, in his study of the Marquess Estate, Scrivener grasps a process parallel to the resistance of everyday life, one which directly threatens it.

The transformation from residence to housing to property mirrors not only a shift in the politics and commodification of space but also, in the case of the Marquess, the movement and disintegration of a working class. In capitalism's 'ascendant' phase, slums at the edge of cities, zones adjacent to the factory, were the organising principles, the abstract rationale of space. [...] Although the organisation of housing estates in within [sic] large cities such as London originally had these same principles, with the increasing commodification of space, such abstractions are now being broken and fragmented.<sup>115</sup>

The class disintegration or decomposition Scrivener identifies has been understood as Thatcher's key political achievement.<sup>116</sup> The 'right to buy', usually erroneously attributed to Thatcher,<sup>117</sup> was in fact pioneered by a Labour Government and it was under Blair's New Labour that a programme began of destroying council housing on a massive scale.<sup>118</sup> By 1999 it was already evident that Labour's housing policy would not deviate from the course established by three successive Conservative governments.<sup>119</sup>

The current political climate under Labour is the same as the Conservative, there is no longer

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115 'Open Yet Excluded', op. cit., pp.87-89.

116 'key to the Thatcherite offensive was the decomposition of class relationships by the rigorous imposition of the individualising forms of money and the law, and their recomposition on the basis of the categories of property owner and citizen, an offensive which has become global in its reach over the 1980s'. Simon Clarke, 'Introduction', op. cit., p.61.

117 Councils had in fact always had a discretionary right to sell their own housing, however in a 1977 housing study Labour's Callaghan government conceded that 'for most people, owning one's house is a basic and natural desire', by the 1979 election '[t]he language used by Labour and the Conservatives to talk about the issue was beginning to converge' see Andy Beckett, 'The right to buy: the housing crisis that Thatcher built', 26 August 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/26/right-to-buy-margaret-thatcher-david-cameron-housing-crisis> [Accessed 8 January 2019] whilst the policy featured prominently in the Conservative manifesto of 1979, and was introduced by the Housing Act 1980 in England and Wales and the Housing Tenants Rights etc. [Scotland] Act 1980, see Alan Murie, 'The Right to Buy: History and Prospect', *History & Policy*, November 2015, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-right-to-buy-history-and-prospect>

118 This programme continues today often under Labour-led Councils, see Architects for Social Housing, 'Mapping London's Estate Regeneration Programme', September, 2017, <https://architectsforsocialhousing.wordpress.com/2017/09/10/mapping-londons-estate-regeneration-programme/> and Kirsty Major, 'Why are Labour councils in London being accused of social cleansing?', November 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/labour-estate-regeneration-council-homes-gentrification-accused-of-social-cleansing-why-a8035851.html> [Both accessed January 2017]

119 This view is supported in Paul Balchin and Maureen Rhoden, *Housing Policy: An introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p.56.



the political will for a commitment to public sector housing. It is dead and buried. Leaving the various housing associations to pick up the pieces. Labour, like the Tories, is far more interested in the private sector and the continuing 'right to buy' path.<sup>120</sup>

In 1999, it was perhaps not yet evident how much further New Labour would innovate in the means, modes and intensity of privatisation. Yet, even then Scrivener entertains the sinister possibility that 'demolition rather than new housebuilding might take priority'.<sup>121</sup> It did. With rising land values and an even further deregulated financial regime: both debt and property prices soared throughout the 2000s and 2010s in the UK.<sup>122</sup> With the rise in household debt also rose an expanding consumer economy, predicated on importing cheap commodities from abroad. Though this was too late to transform Elephant's fate as a shopping centre which had languished through the 1970s, '80s and '90s, it is now due to be demolished in line with a redevelopment of the whole area nevertheless *for housing, shopping and restaurants*.<sup>123</sup> This emergent consumer economy was matched by greater mobility of (some) workers, this has implied dynamic movements inside the UK, even within London, and between the UK and mainland Europe. It is towards this direction that the conclusions of 'Open Yet Excluded' motion.

Capitalism has developed, in the search for greater markets, a need for flexible labour markets, flexible forms of accumulation which require, on the part of the individual, differing sets of skills and strategies if one is to survive. [...] We are at a stage now where work and home are entirely subject to spatial movements in the economy, one can commute or move to where the work is your home is either perceived as a piece of property, an investment, or as a place removed from any differing sociality.<sup>124</sup>

In the critique of the Marquess estate heterogeneity and homogeneity exist in dynamic struggle. The council's attempts to impose heterogeneity on its residents was subsequently followed to an attempt to break it up, through a programme of 'mixed ownership' and the introduction of articulation with its outside. Yet, other agendas run underneath these two formal movements, within each the state, its planners and architects impose solutions on a population which is deemed marginal to the decision-

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120 Adam Scrivener, 'Open Yet Excluded', *Inventory*, Vol. 3 No. 3, 1999 pp.78-91, p.88

121 *Housing Policy: An introduction*, op. cit.

122 Acknowledged by Scrivener in an unpublished text accompanying the film *Flesh & Stone* (2004/5) 'A vast majority suffers because they are made to believe that they have no choice but to take on an enormous debt. They are index-linked into their home and therefore their survival.' Adam Scrivener, 'Peripatetical Meditation', <https://studylib.net/doc/8980775/donnerstag--25.-august---er%C3%B6ffnung-20-00--adam-scrivener> [Accessed 2 March, 2018]

123 See <http://www.southwark.gov.uk/elephant> [Accessed 2 March, 2018]

124 'Open Yet Excluded', op. cit., p.88.

making process. The accounts of the Marquess Estate and Harlow New Town, in particular, allow us to understand the twinned agendas of modernism and the welfare state as they are gradually picked apart and evacuated.<sup>125</sup> As the agenda behind Darbourne and Darke's celebrated approach to council housing is revealed to be the 'piecemeal creation of a race of owner occupiers', ultimately the failure attributed to the Marquess Estate 'is not just one of poor design it is largely to do with the changing sociality in and around such developments. In other words, economics and class.'<sup>126</sup>

With hindsight, the timing of Scrivener's study of the 'Elephant' was just a little too early, or perhaps overly-focused on the Shopping Centre to engage with a major aspect of the 1970s development – which was to become key to the future transformation of the Elephant & Castle area – housing. This was to become an almost legendary struggle over the eventual destruction of the Heygate Estate, the site of over 1000 homes and upwards of 3000s inhabitants, with which the Elephant has now become synonymous. With parallels to Scrivener's study of the Marquess, the result of the scale of this social disaster and the unique social character of the area – the description of which Scrivener's essay pioneered – the Elephant became the site of several notable artistic interventions.<sup>127</sup> Before returning to the central theme of housing I will enter first into a discussion of a few key projects which have a telling relation to the Elephant and *Inventory's* approach to

125 Miller's essay discusses ideal versus actual modernisation of East London in 'East of Eden', op. cit., p.34. For definitive accounts of the history of social housing in London and the UK See Peter Mandler, 'New Towns for Old: the Fate of the Town Centre, in Conekin, Becky, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (Eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*, London; New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1999, pp.208-227 and Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, Yale, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

126 'Open Yet Excluded', p.85-87 sources quoted are unspecified local newspaper articles.

127 So numerous it would be difficult to summarise other than superficially here. Since Scrivener's essay the Elephant has been both a magnet for experimental writing and art projects. Southwark Notes website remains an archive of local opposition to developments around the Elephant, art projects and lively writing, <<https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/>>. Notable examples of interesting writing include: Christopher Jones, 'Nine Things That Aren't There', London: Past Tense, 2001; Matthew Fuller, *Elephant: A Novel*, Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2011; China Mieville, 'London's Overthrow', (a shorter version of this essay was published in the *New York Times Magazine*, on 4 March 2012), <http://www.londonsoverthrow.org/onepage.html>; Laura Oldfield Ford, 'Zones of Sacrifice: 1990-2014', April 2014, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1573-zones-of-sacrifice-1990-2014> and Anon., 'The Killing of the Elephant and Destruction of the Castle', 2017, available: <<http://anguishlanguage.tumblr.com/post/169731417772/anon-the-killing-of-the-elephant-the>>. One of the earliest notable appearances of contemporary art at the Elephant was the brief establishment of Salon3 a project space run by three international curators: Hans Ulrich Obrist, Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt and Maria Lind 2000-2003. A key example of an controversial art project exploiting the destruction of the Heygate Estate was Mike Nelson's aborted project to build a Pyramid/Ziggurat from its rubble, see Christopher Jones, 'Pyramid Dead – The Artangel of History', April, 2014, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/pyramid-dead-artangel-history> [All URLs accessed 7 January, 2019] Another project widely perceived as adding insult to injury was Marcus Coates, *A Ritual for Elephant* (2009). Staged at the Coronet Theatre (demolished 2018) in Elephant the performance 'Marcus Coates' 2004 video work, *Journey to the Lower World*, saw this ordinary-looking Englishman don animal skins and enter a trance state, communing with indigenous animal spirits to answer questions posed by residents of a Liverpool tower block scheduled for demolition. Comic in manner but serious in intent, Coates' performance was a means of evoking the mystical or otherworldly to inspire or encourage an imaginative response from its participant community. [...] *A Ritual For Elephant and Castle* was as an attempt to recreate Coates' experiment on a grander scale.' Louis Pattison, 'Marcus Coates: "A Ritual For Elephant and Castle"', 2009, <https://frieze.com/article/marcus-coates-ritual-elephant-and-castle> [Accessed 22 January 2019]

abstraction.

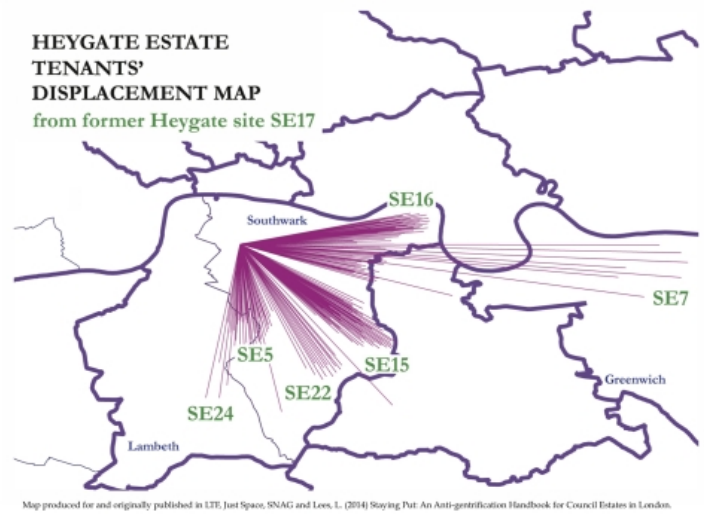


Image: (left) The Heygate Estate, 1975 (right) Heygate Estate Tenants' Displacement Map, 2017

## Art and the Failure of Utopian Ambitions

*Inventory*'s account of the Elephant establishes faultlines of contestation between 'abstract' and 'differential' or 'representational' space to articulate opposing, yet entwined, poles – dynamics, through which the drives contained within built and lived space entangle and distribute themselves. These poles and their oppositions correspond to and orientate some key artistic representations of the area surrounding Elephant & Castle. Through consideration of these artistic renderings or interventions we will see how *Inventory*'s analysis was not only prescient to the history and future of this singular site, but also their own acts of fierce sociology established dynamic and critical terms with which to frame, shape and understand the site as developed by subsequent writers and activists focussed on the Elephant. This is particularly evident in the ways artists have responded to the managed decline of the large-scale Heygate Estate. I illustrate this here through two main practices, both involving re-drawing of the estate, each a graphicalisation or 'abstractions' of a kind. These appear to fall into the opposed camps of differential and abstract space, but each draws power from precisely these operations which become legible by the emphasis of one pole or the other.

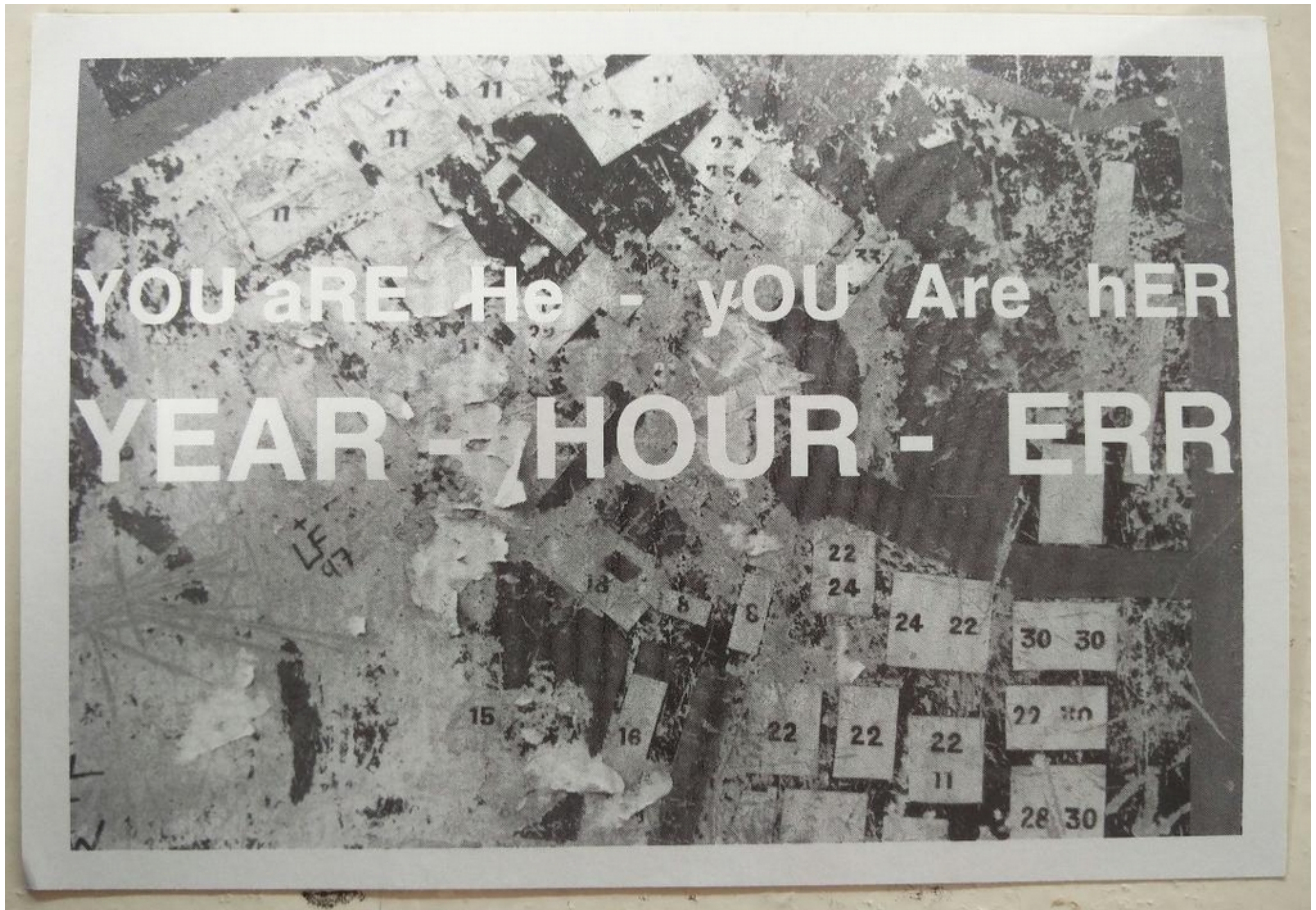


Image: Inventory, *Sticker Project*, c.1999

In Keith Coventry's 'Estate Painting' series, begun in 1991, the aerial plan of blocks on iconic London housing sites are reduced and structured into their 'pure' geometric outlines, painted in monochrome on a white ground, which then allows these homes reduced to shapes, to resemble the suprematist paintings of Kasimir Malevich.<sup>128</sup> In this process, as if following Malevich's advice to 'abandon subject and objects', the artist has removed various built elements, landscape elements, street furniture, streets, walkways, paths from the estate itself, but also removed all reference to the topography of the surrounding area in order to arrive at clearly delimited geometric shapes in space.<sup>129</sup> The reduction of the estate to pure form, suggests the early forms of artistic abstraction from which modern architecture drew, and eventually withdrew, from.<sup>130</sup> The opposite approach is taken by Laura Oldfield Ford in a series of large-scale drawings which feature two large estates close to the Elephant, the Heygate and Aylsbury estates. Ford's drawings are drawn directly from photographs in photorealist style, but often elements such as graffiti, refuse and human figures leak in across the picture plane making ghostly and translucent inscriptions. Though often exhibited in isolation, Ford's drawings stem from a series of photocopied zines, *Savage Messiah*, in which they are accompanied by semi-autobiographical writing often featuring romantic memories, reflections on everyday life, class and political incidents from living or passing through the spaces pictured.<sup>131</sup> Though seemingly opposite, in Coventry's series there is an undeniably melancholic or mournful resonance which, despite its seemingly cruel emphasis on a technical and aerial view of human (increasingly, debateably, inhuman) inhabitation, proposes a critique of planning 'from above'.<sup>132</sup> We might understand both as the artistic staging of 'the failure of Post-war planning to live up to its utopian ambitions'.<sup>133</sup> Here, artistic labour carries out and repeats the forms of abstraction used to model and organise the built, and subsequently lived, environment to the nth degree. Coventry's and *Inventory*'s starting point were the estate maps which already render the UK's council estates as abstractions. Yet, the Coventry's rendering is even further abstracted, shorn of names, pathways, this becomes barely legible space. Certainly (as *Inventory* satirised, and many observers have

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128 Notably, the Tate owns two examples from this series, *East Street Estate* (1994) and *Heygate Estate*, (1995). 'Keith Coventry East Street Estate, 1994' <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/coventry-east-street-estate-t12299> [Accessed March 2017]

129 Kasimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting', *Art in Theory: 1900–2000*, Paul Wood & Charles Harrison (Eds.), Harrison, Charles, and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014, pp.173–183, p.180

130 Discussing Coventry's Estate Paintings series Owen Hatherley argues 'What if they're not merely "about" the decline of a particular idea into the mundanity of council estate layouts, but are instead a reminder of the way a conception of space taken from the avant-garde is now part of everyday life?', Owen Hatherley, 'Estate Paintings' in *Keith Coventry: Twentieth Century Estates*, London: Modern Collections, 2013, available, <http://keithcoventry.com/writing/owen-hatherley> [Accessed 8 January, 2019]

131 These are collected in the anthology Laura Oldfield Ford, *Savage Messiah*. London & New York: Verso, 2018.

132 'Keith Coventry East Street Estate, 1994', op. cit. Malevich frequently cited the experience of mechanical flight in discussions of his work cf. 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting', op. cit.

133 'Keith Coventry East Street Estate, 1994', op. cit.



already noted) the estate maps themselves, though graphically interesting, were rarely functional as navigational aids. In a work by *Inventory*, explored previously in Chapter 6, the estate map becomes a totem for the epistemic violence done to council estate dwellers by planners and architects. In the glossary entries which mirror this artwork work the class content is emphasised with both a *local* feeling for what these signs mean to their addressees and a *universal* reflection on ‘our estate map [...] acts as a jeering guide towards a sobering, perhaps existential recognition of entrapment.’<sup>134</sup> This glossary entry, and subsequent art works by the group reproduce stifled articulations by local residents as forms of interruption or indifference to the planners and council management’s top-down view in the form of graffiti upon this signage turning them into community notice boards. Coventry’s paintings do not represent an inversion of this view, by celebrating the Heygate and Aylsbury’s planners as modernist artists, however the graffiti and other traces of inhabitation are stripped away. In line with Malevich’s processes of abstraction, through the rendering of these forms as ‘pure’ idea, the Estate Paintings actually render the heteronomous situation of council housing after the ‘right to buy’ somewhat more autonomous, if abstract. This is in marked contrast to the Artangel’s failed project to have artist Mike Nelson build a ziggurat from the wreckage of the Heygate’s housing emphatically “‘thoughtless” in relation to the history of the site and the people there.’<sup>135</sup> Ford’s work equally abstracts, but arguably falsifies authentic experience by counterfactually including it. Coventry’s series does not achieve the ‘domination of form as an end in itself over content and things’ so much as redirect abstraction towards a troubling of the relationship between abstraction and planning, and a memorialising universalisation of the lives of local inhabitants.<sup>136</sup> The conceptual idealism and universality enabled by abstraction, suggests these concrete forms as heroic, symbolically powerful and mutable, loosed from the earth or the specifics of built, or painterly material. The act of geometric representation removes also the earthly contingencies of political bureaucracy and governance. Those living in social housing are for once honoured with appropriate opacity.

Probing Coventry’s exploration of modernist abstraction in its entanglement with everyday working class life in the United Kingdom we can specify with greater accuracy *Inventory*’s own dynamic intercourse with abstraction by situating it amidst its commonality and difference with artistic zeitgeists of the times.<sup>137</sup> *Inventory* confronted the modernist plan, not removed from but, in the

134 ‘Estate Map’, op. cit., p.17.

135 ‘Pyramid Dead – The Artangel of History’, op. cit.

136 ‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism’, op. cit. Cf. Coventry’s own comments on the series, ‘I’m interested really in looking at aspects of art history and grafting on to them some kind of social issue, so that the two seem to make a comment upon the other.’ Coventry quoted in ‘Estate Paintings’ op. cit.

137 If we recall Simon Patterson’s famous re-rendering of the iconic London Underground map, *The Great Bear*, (1992) or Keith Farquhar’s series of paintings re-rendering of the covers of popular paperbacks by British

thick of its interaction with working class everyday life and through a critical opposition of lived space and abstract space. Their efforts to get 'close to phenomena' involved a performative distance (the assumption of the position of sociologist), where Oldfield Ford's staging involves a performative proximity and authenticity which ultimately rings hollow. This was to apply a historical reading to the modernist plan as an object with lived consequences where Coventry submits them to the inconsequential time of 'post...'. Similarly, understood as a modernist object, the scientific journal was appropriated in a related manner: *Inventory* approached the modernist plan and the journal as objects seemingly out of step with time, but which nonetheless imply human community and potential agency. They appropriated these 'abstract' objects in order to properly historicise them, understand them as products of human intention and reinvigorate them with new knowledge, urgent concerns, living force and the energies of struggling expressive humanity.

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psychologist R.D. Laing (1996–98), it becomes clear that appropriating and detouring elements of abstraction within UK culture, often bearing the traces of a legacy of socialistic elements of state provision, was a commonplace in early and mid-1990s art. Patterson's work conflates two systems or indexes, blurring the utilitarian with the pop cultural, this serves to emphasise both accidental correspondences and the arbitrary and, arguably, disorientating logic such systems are based upon. Yet the outcome is pop (art) and the popular, suggesting not new knowledge but quickly confirmed knowledge arranged in a new template. Farquhar, like Coventry, lends a monumentality, heroism and also sense of estrangement to what had become an underlooked and undervalued form of abstraction. The purpose of Coventry's application of extreme abstraction to the modernist plan is precisely to implicate, by its absence, working class everyday life.

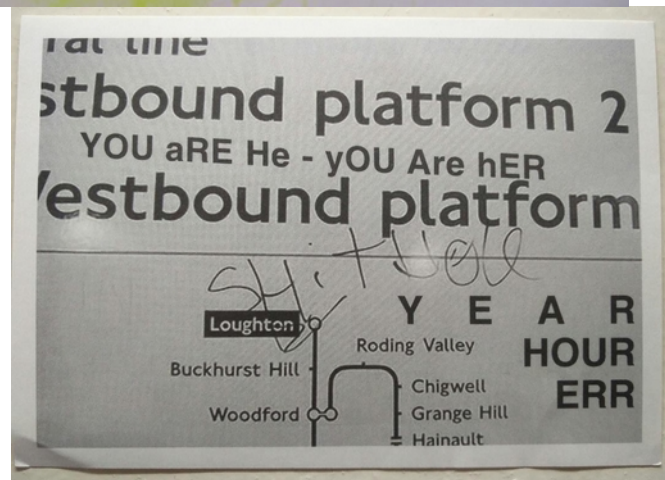


Image: (Top left) Keith Coventry, *Heygate Estate*, 1992 (Top right) Simon Patterson, *The Great Bear*, 1992; (Middle right) Laura Oldfield Ford, *Heygate Estate* 1976 (Bottom left) Keith Coventry, *Aylsbury Estate*, 1993 2010 (bottom right) Inventory, *Sticker Project*, c.1999





Image: Inventory, Estate Map, 1999

# The Last Days of London

In the material presented, *Inventory*'s urban studies approach the legacy of post-war modernist planning; the legacy of welfare state provision; its dismantling; the displacement and destruction waged on London's urban fabric and working class population as a result, in accounts which are sociologically legible. The journal published these alongside numerous other approaches to the 'essay as form' involving reflection on the material and social fabric of the city which often took novel psychogeographical approaches.<sup>138</sup> In 1997 *Inventory* published an essay by prominent London fiction writer Iain Sinclair. Yet beyond the visibility of figures was an extended pool of experimental writers and artists exploring similar themes and territory in publications like *Inventory*. The themes which *Inventory* and its contributors explored drew from Benjamin's absorption of surrealist writers such as Aragon, and his attempt to invent and develop novel forms of describing urban experience.<sup>139</sup> These were for *Inventory* entwined with newer sources such as Lefebvre and the Situationist International, but also fused with a peculiar home-brewed English urban surrealism: cosmic, apocalyptic, anti/post-colonial and aesthetically structured by the triple destructions of the WWII bombing of London; its post-war urban reconstruction and the decimation (destruction by design) by the neoliberal economic shock treatments of the 1980s. Just as Theodor Adorno could 'retroactively' conflate post-war urban planning of European cities with the bombing campaigns which had apparently been its cause, so the industrial dilapidation and blight wrought by Thatcher would become naturalised as the precondition for 'in-fill', as studied by Scrivener at the Marquess, and for 'ad-hoc' millennial 'pop-up' architecture.<sup>140</sup> Each phase of urban 'development'

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138 Several of these shall be discussed from the perspective of literary form in Chapter 6. Some key examples are: *Inventory* & Gautier Deblonde, 'Urban Odyssey', *Inventory* Vol.1 No.2, pp.66–67; *Inventory*, *Orpheus Street*, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.4–7; Nick Norton, 'Haptic Radio', Giorgio Agostini, 'Sites For A Sound Piece', Steve Beard 'Dead London', Jakob Jakobsen, 'A Tour Of The Earthworks', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2, pp.39–42; Greg Barret, 'Reading the Urban through Fate and Risk', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.110–127; Sean Harding, 'Urban Allegories', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.37–42 Institute of Open Studies, 'In a Street', Neil Chapman & Steven Beard, 'The Approach', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999; pp.98–109; Richard Bradbury, 'Granted Ground', Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.43–73; *Inventory*, *Flesh & Stone*, Vol.5 Nos.2&3, pp.44–50.

139 'Aragon performed an anthropological mercy mission for an aspect of Parisian society that would otherwise have been overlooked. In these passages lurked a mythology of the modern, a means of reading the secret undercurrents of "the present" through the outmoded and forgotten'. 'Botanizing on the Asphalt', p.43.

140 'Specifically military acts such as the bombing raids on German cities functioned as slum clearing, retroactively integrated with that urban transformation which has long been observable around the globe, not in North America alone.' Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (Trans. E. B Ashton), London & New York: Continuum, 2007, p.302. In this light also of interest are Sir Leslie Patrick Abercrombie comments in 1944 on the fortuitous coincidence of aerial bombing and existing plans to decentralise populations and industry: 'the necessity for some plan of action became more obvious and the opportunity presented itself to locate population and industry more logically' Abercrombie quoted in Frederick Gibberd, Ben Hyde Harvey and Len White, *Harlow: The Story of a New Town*. Stevenage (Herts): Publication for Companies, 1980, p.5. A study of post-crisis pop-up urbanism in

retroactively integrates its preconditions. In the 1990s these conditions were further structured by the phenomena known as ‘globalisation’ which, after the fall of the Berlin wall, break-up of the Soviet Empire and end of the Cold War began to restructure places, nations and cities in line with emerging local-national and international political and financial frameworks. What was, perhaps optimistically, seen as the breakdown of tired structures swiftly transformed into an seemingly endless expansion of capitalist social relations across the globe.<sup>141</sup>

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London describes the form’s prominence in the first decades of the millenium. Mara Ferreri, *Occupying Vacant Spaces: Precarious Politics of Temporary Urban Reuse*. PhD Thesis. London: Queen Mary University, 2013, available <http://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/jspui/handle/123456789/8460> [Accessed 20 February, 2018]

141 Described by David Cunningham as a ‘global generalization of capitalist relations of production and exchange’. David Cunningham, ‘Re-Placing the Novel, Sinclair, Ballard and the Spaces of Literature’, Robert Bond and Jenny Bavidge (eds), *City Visions: The Work of Iain Sinclair*, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, pp.134-146, available <http://www.ballardian.com/re-placing-the-novel-sinclair-ballard> [Accessed 3 October, 2016]



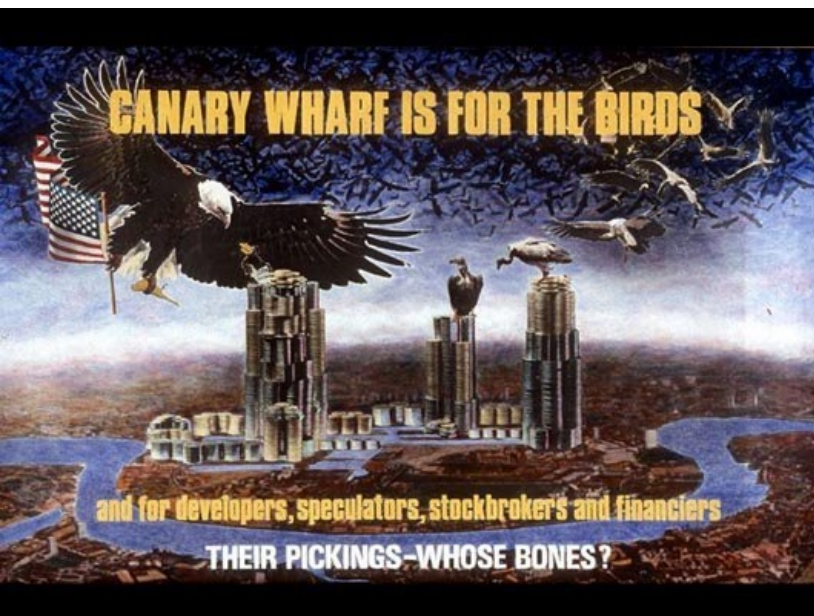


Image: (left) Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn, *Docklands Poster Project*, 1981-88 and (right) Mike Seabourne, Advertising Hoarding, c.1980s





Image: Black Audio Film Collective, *Twilight City*, 1989

## Thatcher's Corridor of Prosperity

It is no accident that in East London narratives of ambitious social provision through architecture, its denigration and transformation into heritage, and the realisation of a new experimental zone of private speculative building would converge and enter into conflict with the radical readings of the built environment promulgated by *Inventory*. In an essay for *Inventory* (1996) Keith Miller, surveying the architectural, cultural and literary transformation of the East End since the 1950s, presents the decline of public housing provision alongside the phantasmagoria of a 'corridor of prosperity' provided by the London Docklands.<sup>142</sup>

During the last fifteen years or so Government policies have all but stopped the building of local authority housing [...] In East London the most striking and numerous new residential developments have grown up along the riverside, aimed squarely at the cosmopolitan businessperson, providing garages, gyms and security cameras and often instilling a sort of laager [sic] mentality in their occupants. The metamorphosis of East London into a 'corridor of prosperity' has yet to gather any real pace, despite large and glitzy business developments at St. Katharine's Dock and in and around the Isle of Dogs; the highly visible and as yet only partially occupied tower at Canary Wharf has not so far proved the magnetic emblem of good times ahead for which its beleaguered investors will have hoped.<sup>143</sup>

Miller's essay is notable for a number of themes which will traverse this chapter, but also subjects to which *Inventory* would return in later work. Key here is the shift marked by Thatcher's government away from 'collectivism'; the question of the 'fragmented topology' or heterogeneous built space of the East End and its construction in mainstream ideology as 'culturally exotic' – representing a part excluded from the rest of the city – 'a sort of human game reserve'.<sup>144</sup> Also of interest are Miller's discussions of British (architectural and literary) modernism's approach to working class housing and spaces (e.g. terraced housing and the pub); and his critical discussion of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century literary construction of the East End in the work of writers Peter Ackroyd, Iain Sinclair, Alan Hollinghurst and Patrick Wright.<sup>145</sup>

142 Keith Miller, 'East of Eden', *Inventory* Vol.1 No.3, 1996, pp.26-41. In relation to cultural heritage Miller's brief discussion of the popular phenomenon of the re-enactments of historic events (p.33) clearly anticipates *Inventory*'s later mass actions, the importance of such events were discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.

143 'East of Eden', op. cit., p.35.

144 'East of Eden', op. cit.,

145 Quotations respectively from 'East of Eden', op. cit., p.36 and p.34. This is self-evidently a grouping which excludes women writers, not only contemporary writers such as Monica Ali Laura Oldfield Ford and Rachel Lichtenstein who have who have contributed substantially to the reconstruction of the cultural image of the East

Miller notes how Thatcher's measures had affected not only the present but also the past. Arguing that her 'aspects of our culture to which was formerly ascribed some sort of autonomy and permanence are now subjected to the same implacable and indifferent "market forces" as any grocer's shop.'<sup>146</sup> The essay doesn't only lament commodification, but considers it integral to and consequent of fundamental political and economic changes. According to Miller, Thatcher's ethos involved creating the myth of a future by raiding not just the past, but also the territory of her opponents.

Creating a culture of aspiration was her grand *projet*, enabling her to poach the egalitarian rhetoric of the Labour Party, and snap up thousands of impatient Labour voters into the bargain. But for Thatcher the means and the end of self-advancement was money. The beneficiaries of her administration could be relied on to perpetrate those infelicities of taste through which new money is gloatingly identified by old.<sup>147</sup>

Thatcher's rollback against the social democratic state enacted a radical revaluation of values. Initially this created apparent ruination, but the change initiated would be completed and continued through a transformation of the ideological and built environment by inventing new values and reinvesting old ones. For Miller, despite Thatcher's 'notorious indifference to cultural issues' her project to rebalance class power coincided with postmodernism contributing to the emergence a 'Heritage Britain'.<sup>148</sup> Already in 1996, this augured something worse than a trip down memory lane.

Today the postwar consensus that global and strategic action was the only way to alleviate inner-city problems seems to have evaporated. We may yet see in a viciously ironic consummation of the heritage industry's cultural agenda, the return of the soup kitchen and the Ragged School.<sup>149</sup>

An event through which Miller marks the evaporation of the post-war consensus and its transformation into forms of revanchism is the destruction of Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993).<sup>150</sup> Though Miller regrets Tower Hamlets Council's destruction of habitable housing nearby as much as

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End and its history. Indeed it might be considered an active and almost systematic omission of this group of male authors to work to obscure the long and rich history of women writers activity in the East End, even luminaries such as Mary Wollstencraft, Anna Barbauld, Flora Tristan.

146 Ibid., p.28.

147 Ibid., p.28.

148 A theme also explored in the essays: Damian Abbott, 'Celebrating the Millenium', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.74–82; Rakesh Sidhu, 'Literature and Partition', Vol.3 No.2 1999 and Nick Norton, 'Floating Island', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.54–60.

149 Ibid., p.31

150 Ibid., p.37.

the destruction of Whiteread's 'haunting installation' other critics have understood her as a partner to, rather than opponent of, this process.<sup>151</sup>

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151 'Whiteread talked about the "sculpture" being typical of the Victorian domestic architecture found all over London. Her desire to 'universalise' the meaning of this particular terrace, resulted in the original building being stripped of its history and the deep political implications of that history. One of the major sponsors of Whiteread's activities was Tarmac, who were daily throwing people out of their homes so that big business could bulldoze unwanted motorways through Britain. Whiteread had nothing to say about the politics of housing until it was suggested that the money wasted on her 'sculpture' could have been better spent building homes, at which point she shamelessly began claiming that "House" was somehow a protest against homelessness!' Stewart Home, 'Doctorin' Our Culture: On The KLF & Rachel Whiteread', <https://www.stewarthomesociety.org/klf.htm> [Accessed 24 January 2019]



Image: Rachel Whiteread, (from left) Clapton Park Estate, Mandeville Street, London E5, Amergate Court, Norbury Court, October 1993; Clapton Park Estate, Mandeville Street, London E5, Bakewell Court, Repton Court, March 1995; Trowbridge Estate, London E9, Hannington Point, Hilmarton Court, Deverill Point, June 1995, 1996

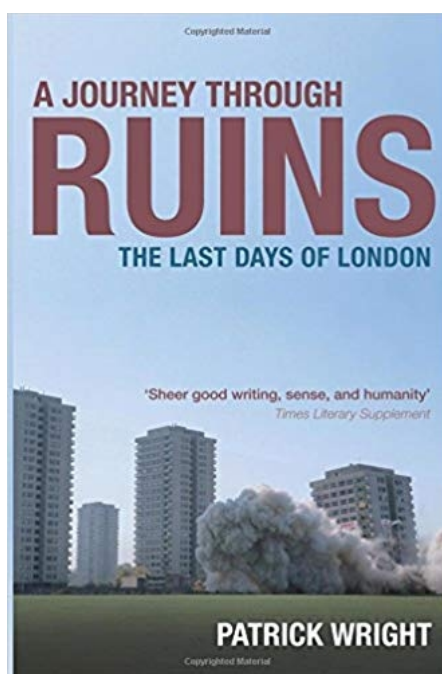
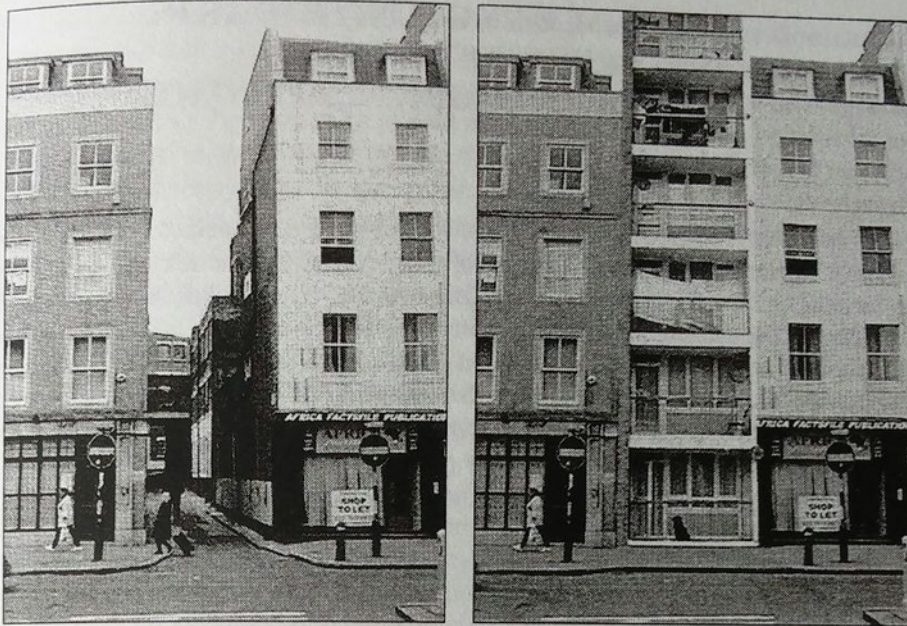


Image: (left) The demolition of the Trowbridge Estate, Hackney Downs, as featured on the cover of Patrick Wright's, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (2009 (1991)) (right) Flyer for 'Demolition Day' on Hackney Marshes, 1993





*fig.6 Before and After Ad Hoc Architecture*



*fig.7 A Variety of Housing Introduced to Liverpool Street*

Image: Forms of 'ad-hoc architecture' proposed by *Inventory* in *Inventory*, 'Exile & Kingdom', *Inventory*, Vol.4-No2-  
p.11

## Iain Sinclair's Pastoral City of Disappearances

Another figure who has embodied a culture of melancholy surrounding the manifest destruction of parts of east London is Iain Sinclair. Novelist Iain Sinclair's work has often been associated with that of Patrick Keiller, and it was by way of introduction from their former tutor that *Inventory* solicited Sinclair's contribution to the journal in 1997.<sup>152</sup> Sinclair was at the time a prominent name with which to associate the journal, and this lent legitimacy to its urban explorations and shared themes of displacement, inscription, myth and mythopoeisis. However, here I would like to outline some crucial differences between *Inventory*'s approach, differences which are decisive for the critical positions which I wish to attribute to them.

By the mid-2000s, according to Sinclair, London was becoming a 'City of Disappearances'.<sup>153</sup> Sinclair has generally been celebrated by critics, yet some have indicated that 'the marks of [...] a problematic complicity with the forces of investment capital cannot be entirely erased from Sinclair's own works'.<sup>154</sup> Another critic, John Barker argues, in a major reappraisal, that Sinclair is a kind of 'literary estate agent' who, in relentlessly packaging East London with 'bohemian ambience' has 'not just lost his material but contributed to the loss'.<sup>155</sup> Critical assessments of Sinclair, especially from a class perspective, are few. Keith Miller's essay for *Inventory* anticipates some of these, arguing that Sinclair and Patrick Wright – a close collaborator – ultimately reproduce an image of the East end as both 'culturally exotic' and as a kind of bricolage: '[a]s with the built environment, the impression is of collage rather than synthesis: of discrete communities living in each other's pockets, creating a picturesque landscape of abrupt contrasts and asymmetries but mixing little'.<sup>156</sup> Whilst Sinclair's reception has associated him with situationist and surrealist urbanism, as both David Cunningham and Patrick Wright point out, his literary origins stem from the 1970s British reception of the pastoral 'new localism' of American poets such as Charles Olson.<sup>157</sup> Sinclair's urbanism has another distinctly pastoral source in the form of E. O. Gordon's *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles*, a druidic guide which has laid the foundation for the traverses of London which are the inspiration for his many books.<sup>158</sup>

152 Adam Scrivener in conversation August 2018.

153 Iain Sinclair (ed.), *London: City of Disappearances*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006.

154 'Re-Placing the Novel, Sinclair, Ballard and the Spaces of Literature', op. cit.

155 Iain Sinclair, 'Reader Flattery – Iain Sinclair and the Colonisation of East London', July, 2006,

<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/reader-flattery-%E2%80%93-iain-sinclair-and-colonisation-east-london>

156 'East of Eden', op. cit., p.36.

157 'Re-Placing the Novel, Sinclair, Ballard and the Spaces of Literature', op. cit., and Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, (1991) 2009.

158 Gordon, E. O. and J. A. G Griffith. *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles*. London: Covenant Pub. Co., 1932.



Wright notes, ‘taking [Gordon’s] triangulation as a coordinate he started to add lines of his own drawing on just about any aspect of the city that was archaic, monstrous, or merely surplus to present requirements’.<sup>159</sup> According to Wright, on the one hand ‘Sinclair’s renegade charting of the city has provided a whole industry’, on the other, he is ‘poet of the Welfare State, the laureate of its morbidity and failure.’<sup>160</sup> However, what is most frequently ‘monstrous, or merely surplus to [...] requirements’ in Sinclair’s prose, are the classed and racialised subjects – ‘the jobless, the unwaged, the never haves’<sup>161</sup> – of East London seen by him not as agents of their environment but grotesque, has-beens, foils only for nostalgia and disgust.<sup>162</sup> Sinclair’s registration of concentrations of wealth and power such as Canary Wharf’s ‘crystal synthesis of capital’ are inventive, but his registration of the ‘lines of force’ behind London’s transformation are symbolic and occulted.<sup>163</sup> He provides no insight into the lives of those who provide the scenery in his novels, in fact he mystifies both them and their built environment. There is no account of either the production of goods which keeps capitalism running or the reproduction of living labour which services it.

The problematic way in which Sinclair views cultural others – both classed and racialised – is attested to in his only contribution to *Inventory*, ‘Skating on Thin Eyes’, a shortened excerpt of the opening chapter in his novel *Lights Out for the Territory*.<sup>164</sup> Discussing the graffiti in his local area of Mapledene, Hackney, which he shared with Tony & Cheri Blair and Patrick Wright, Sinclair declares:

My own patch in Hackney has been mercilessly colonised by competing voices from elsewhere: Kurds, Peruvians, Irish, Russians, Africans. Contour lines of shorthand rhetoric asserting the borders between different areas of influence.<sup>165</sup>

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As noted by Patrick Wright in *A Journey Through Ruins*, op. cit., p.218.

159 *A Journey Through Ruins*, op. cit., p.218.

160 Ibid., both quotations, p.219. Wright’s own analysis of the welfare state and its demise is lacking. His material analysis tends towards the observation of biographical and architectural features at the expense of social forces and his own ruralist tastes are given away by his preferences for an early-1920s ‘cottage-like’ estate on the Isle of Dogs (p.226) and low-rise brick cul-de-sac in Hackney (p.79).

161 Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London*, London: Granta Books, 1998, p.78.

162 See also, ‘For Sinclair however, only bohemians count. The multicultural proletariat appears only in summing-up phrases, or as crazies. In *Lights Out*, for example, there are no black people except for a bag lady on Queensbridge Road, and an incompetent mini cab driver at the end.’ ‘Reader Flattery’, op. cit.

163 Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London*. London: Granta Books, 1998, p.361.

164 Iain Sinclair, ‘Skating on Thin Eyes’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.8-12.

165 ‘Skating on Thin Eyes’, op. cit., p.11.

Sinclair could then only imagine the social relations around him, from which his erudition and literary metier separates him, as a barbaric war of all against all – a war for territory. Even if property ownership is alluded to – ‘my own patch’ – (like Jencks) Sinclair’s emphasis remains trained on the purported hostility and inhumanity of those ‘competing voices from elsewhere’.<sup>166</sup> Through Sinclair’s urban pastoral we might scry the ongoing but obscured connections in bourgeois writing between the picturesque – the picturing of landscape, particularly ruins – and the picaresque – narratives dealing with rogues and their adventures.<sup>167</sup>

Over time, and therefore presently, Sinclair and Wright’s collaged, mythic and mystificatory city has been absorbed smoothly into a re-gentrified London formed of village-like areas – emblems of ‘a new pastoralism and nostalgia’<sup>168</sup> which have been cultivated by, and serve those who profit. Walking, as Sinclair asserts, is his ‘way to explore and exploit the city’. Through such statements, Sinclair has indicated his rapport with the class of owners: that part of the population possessive of disposable capital for whom exclusive community-building, ‘secret [i.e. privated] history’ and rising property prices form a complimentary symbiosis.<sup>169</sup>

## Inventory Exceed Sinclair

There are a number of modes by which *Inventory*’s approach to the urban exceeded Sinclair’s. Firstly, the sites *Inventory* chose to produce extended studies in London are sometimes peripheral, but not exotic places, they are both pedestrian and familiar in their status as archetypes of specific phases of UK urban planning and spatial design and these are correlated to specific moments in the developmental history of the welfare state. There *Inventory* also find heterogeneity and elements ‘surplus’ to the main story of the city, but these are rarely presented as forms of ‘counter-magic’. Secondly, in successive accounts *Inventory* registered the agency of the marginalised populations

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>167</sup> My conjoining of these two terms is here speculative. For an account of ‘picaresque literature’ see F. W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, New York : Houghton Mifflin, 1907. A significant influence on my argument for connecting these terms is derived from Peter Linebaugh’s account of the ‘picaresque proletarian’ in Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London; New York: Penguin, 1993), pp.119-122. The term ‘picturesque’ enters the English vocabulary via William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*, London : Printed by A. Strahan, for T. Cadell junior and W. Davies, 1800. For an example typifying the aesthetic and social presuppositions of a new ‘urban pastoral’ managerialism, see <http://www.urbanpastoral.co/>

<sup>168</sup> ‘East of Eden’, op. cit., p.29.

<sup>169</sup> ‘Skating on Thin Eyes’, op. cit., p.11. See Keiller’s critical reevaluation, ‘[i]n London at the moment, psychogeography leads not so much to avant-garde architecture, but to gentrification instead.’ Patrick Keiller, ‘Architecture: to Change Life We Must First Change Space...’, *The Independent*, 6 March 2000, p.19.

living in the sites they visited, and in more than only occulted terms. This is the profound omission of an entire discourse not only of modern, but postmodern urbanism, architecture and planning, from the single building to entire cities are discussed as if human experience has no bearing upon them (as if they were not built for humans at all). Only bourgeois experience counts, subjectivity is distributed from the above of class hierarchy of 'professionals'. Sinclair addresses this by emphasising his own direct (more or less bourgeois bohemian) experience and wandering thoughts stimulated by the phenomena of the city, *Inventory* develop this with both a harder sociological analysis and inclusion of their own experience and consideration of the experience of others untarnished by disgust. Finally, the journal did not simplistically celebrate graffiti as some form of writing by visionaries and presumably, as in Sinclair's practice, only legible by them, but they frequently published the writing of the unknown without condescension – these 'found texts' appear regularly from the first issue to the last, sometimes appearing as singular contributions, rarely but on occasion authored, sometimes absorbed into the Glossary section of the journal – fragments of texts written and abandoned by homeless, anonymous figures.<sup>170</sup> Graffiti is explored throughout *Inventory* journal's pages, acting as kind of counter-writing or limit-writing and provocation to decipherment.<sup>171</sup> *Inventory* gave these 'texts that nobody is going to stop and read' (according to Sinclair) a readership and a critical context to be read within.<sup>172</sup>

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170 Sinclair on graffiti: 'As newspapers have atrophied into the playthings of grotesque megalomaniacs, uselessly shrill exercises in mind-control, so disenfranchised authors have been forced to adapt the walls to playful collages of argument and invective. Not the publicly displayed, and quietly absorbed, papers of Chinese, but editorials of madness. Texts that nobody is going to stop and read. Unchallenged polemics.' 'Skating on Thin Eyes', op. cit., p.11.

171 A brief list of contributions dealing with the subject of graffiti: Damian Abbott, 'Every Stage of Thamesmead Knows It' op. cit.; Adam Scrivener, 'Tagging', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996; Calum Storrie, 'From Soane to Soane', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997; Nick Norton, Adam Scrivener, 'Estate Map', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999; Patrick Ward, 'Limen', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.1, 2000; Max Reeves, 'Glamour', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2, 2001; Steve Beard, 'Jack the Mack Prophecies', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005 and Max Reeves, 'Rorschach Test', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3, 2005.

172 'Skating on Thin Eyes', op. cit., p.11.

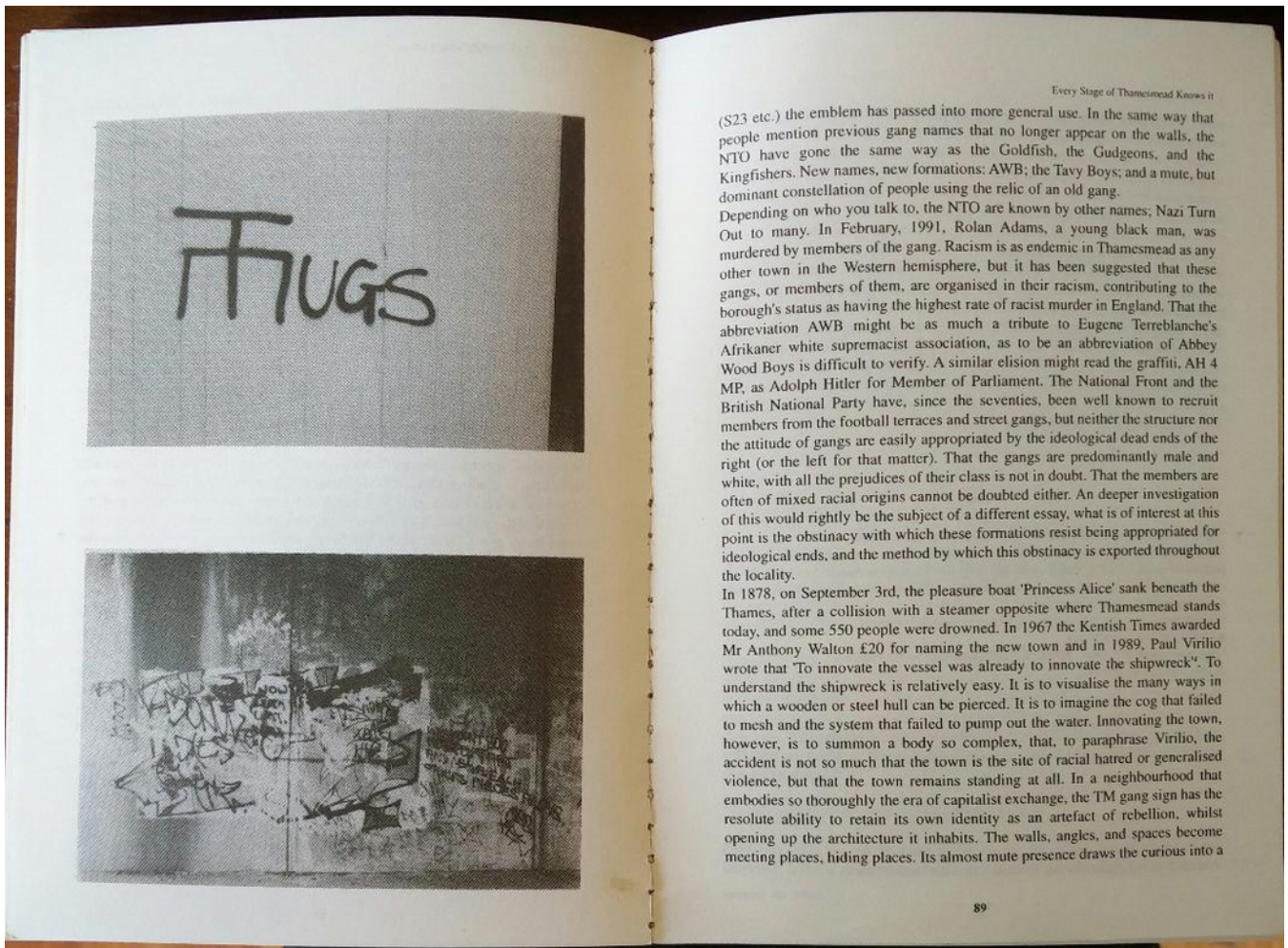


Image: 'THugs' or 'Tmugs', (above) anonymous graffiti adapting the Thamesmead Estate logo (below) graffiti in situ on Thamesmead Housing Estate, illustrating Damian Abbott, 'Every Stage of Thamesmead Knows it', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.83-90, pp.88-89

# Conclusions

## Restless City

Restlessness and absences were problems which *Inventory* probed and delved in the most unlikely places.

Perhaps, one thought, this feeling of *restlessness* that seemed to be so characteristic of life in London was not really such a problem after all. Perhaps it was something to be valued. London might be uncomfortable to live in, but it avoided the more stupefying aspects of *dwelling* that a less spatially impoverished, more 'architectural' city might encourage.<sup>173</sup>

Under Keiller's initial guidance, *Inventory* combined elements of objective sociology (Mass-Observation, surrealism, situationist urbanism, dissident sociology, anthropology, archival research) with subjective elements (personal experience, empathy, imagination). These elements came together with the method and modes of writing derived from Bataille and Benjamin in *Inventory* to generate an edifice and process as restless as the object it studied, that is London as a contradictory and restless system, a cipher for the unmoored project of modernity itself. However, in the *restless* and even *relentless* city, psychogeography itself could come to stand for a form of compensation for powerlessness and even quietism. Keiller later claimed, that 'in London' during this period, 'incapable of magic architecture, we made art out of our deprivation.'<sup>174</sup> In their final issue *Inventory* self-critically argued,

One cannot approach the city from the indifferent, bohemian, perspective of the flaneur. Nor can a person who executes a derive be described as 'homeless' nor can it be compared to anthropological fieldworkers, 'professional-strangers' who vainly attempt to position themselves within a self-reflexive state as marginal, yet 'objective', observers. What is contemptible in all these approaches is the romantic willingness for 'exile' without the strength to abandon oneself to it without recourse or reserve.<sup>175</sup>

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173 Patrick Keiller, 'London in the Early 1990s', in *The View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes*. Verso, 2013, pp.85-96, pp.88-89.

174 Patrick Keiller, 'Architecture: to Change Life We Must First Change Space...', op. cit., p.19.

175 'One cannot approach the city from the indifferent, bohemian, perspective of the flaneur. Nor can a person who executes a derive be described as 'homeless' nor can it be compared to anthropological fieldworkers, 'professional-strangers' who vainly attempt to position themselves within a self-reflexive state as marginal, yet 'objective', observers. What is contemptible in all these approaches is the romantic willingness for 'exile' without the strength to abandon oneself to it without recourse or reserve. The city's cartography cannot be transformed by a small number of passionate souls alone. Many more must continue to challenge it with a scrupulous and deliberate series of collective and individual assaults. And even if these programs are set in motion, one must hope that this gradual and modest erosive process will eventually bear witness to a fracture that will be increasingly difficult for all to ignore.' *Inventory*, 'Flesh and Stone', op. cit., p.50.

Against the tendency to reproduce London as a ‘bricolage’, which is moderated against by Benjamin’s careful consideration of totality and the historicity of forms and Bataille’s aggressive approach towards phenomena which together add up for *Inventory* to a methodology by which not only the object is reconstellated and disturbed but the subject too, the series of urban studies I have surveyed each form a concrete totality whose particularities and connection to wider problems are probed in detail and from varying perspectives. The failures legible at Elephant, the Marquess, Thamesmead and Harlow, allow us to study the problem of planners’ ‘utopias’ which had fallen afoul of the lived practice of their inhabitants and the changing agenda of the State. At the Marquess, we are presented with ‘a rural/urban utopia’ ‘evoking past ideals’ an attempt to create an ‘estate that isn’t an estate’, yet ‘without giving any consideration to the social or economic factors of daily existence for many Marquess residents’.<sup>176</sup> At Harlow, Michael Ricketts observing ‘considerable physical deterioration [...] areas, buildings which have not been “repainted” or renewed and which emphatically bear the marks of decay’, understood the town as ‘a petrification of a “plan” or “set” for the narrative of life.’<sup>177</sup> The ‘modernist’ models encountered in these two projects are exposed as having organised around forms of nostalgia and pastoralism, ‘the complexity of modernity is repressed at Harlow’.<sup>178</sup> An idea of modernist complexity figures in an earlier text by Eric .C. Puryear which gives an account of Le Corbusier’s self-defeating painting practice at Eileen Gray’s house E.1027 at Cap Martin, France. Despite Le Corbusier’s doctrine of virulent modernism and his association of modern architecture with cleanliness, his own work at E.1027 becomes a process of abject and sexually aggressive defacement.<sup>179</sup> Indeed deep ambiguities about architectural modernism’s discourse and reality stretch right back to its beginnings. In Damian Abbott’s account of the ‘monstrous appetites’ that the monolithic Thamesmead Estate could not contain, Thamesmead is projected by its planners as ‘London’s dream town’ yet ‘the dreams that pass through this body take the shape of rivalries’, its inhabitants are shown to reshape and repurpose the spaces, administration and symbolism by which they were to be contained from below.<sup>180</sup> *Inventory*’s successive accounts of such failed utopias contribute to a picture of a compromised English modernism undermined by nostalgia, condescension and the sublimated separations of class agendas.<sup>181</sup> Yet, as Adam Scrivener insists ‘intrinsically there is nothing wrong with the so-called

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176 ‘Open Yet Excluded’, op. cit., p.84 (both) and p.85.

177 ‘Harlow’, op. cit., p.42.

178 ‘Harlow’, op. cit., p.51.

179 ‘Modern architecture was to be the centerpiece for this fresh atmosphere of activity: turning itself into a plenum that gathered and circulated sunlight and air. The home, sanitized by a coat of white paint, became the emblem of the liberation from the abject.’ Eric C. Puryear, ‘Dust in the Machine’, *Inventory*, Vol.1. No.2, 1996, p.11.

180 ‘Every Stage of Thamesmead’, op. cit., p.87.

181 In Mandler’s measured account we can discern substantial commercial pressure from developers and political pressure to clear the inner city of working class housing, a process which *Inventory* began to track in the late-1990s and we continue to witness today. ‘There seems little doubt that local authorities, lacking strong aesthetic and

“heroic” period of public sector housing.’<sup>182</sup> Therefore, though the complexity of modernism is probed, the problem is not conceived as simply one of ‘modernism’ but its failure to overcome existing class agendas and fully take root in the UK. *Inventory*’s explorations can be conceived as a critical reception of modernist architecture, planning, landscape and its imbrications in the social architecture of the welfare state just as these were succumbing to postmodernisation. Postmodern theory and architecture culturally attacked not just modernist ‘style’ but undermined arguments for universal provision and the emancipatory politics which had generated them. I argue that *Inventory*, through explorations of the journal as form and in their critical history of modernist public housing, formulated a ‘*Proletarian Answer to the [post]Modernist Question*’.<sup>183</sup>

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design commitments of their own and (in the case of Labour authorities) losing faith by the late 1950s in the prospects for a publicly directed urban renewal programme, welcomed the advent of comprehensive redevelopment schemes promoted by private developers. At the top, there was a political consensus behind such schemes. At the grassroots, there was at least little resistance. Recent research has suggested that the considerable democratic pressure exerted upon local councillors for the redevelopment of inner-ring working-class housing must bear as much responsibility for the rash of tower-block constructions in the early 1960s as any arrogant imposition by modern architects or planners.’ ‘New Towns for Old’, op. cit., p.221.

182 ‘Open Yet Excluded’, op. cit., p.88.

183 By this I mean *Inventory* grappled with modernist legacies at a point at which the phenomenon of postmodernism was interrupting and recoding them. Regarding the modernist question Nick Hubble formulates the question as follows: ‘In ‘Crisis and Criticism’, first published in 1937, Alick West identified the question facing modernist writers in the interwar period: ‘When I do not know any longer who are the “we” to whom I belong, I do not know any longer who “I” am either’ (West 1975: 19). This book will argue that much British proletarian literature of the 1930s may be seen as a response to this ‘modernist question’ of the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ and took the form, as suggested by West, of an expansion of modernist techniques and scope rather than a rejection of them.’ Nick Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. Regarding *Inventory*’s answer to the postmodern question, the question would be what to do now that universalism has seemingly failed. I understand *Inventory*’s answer to consist in a search for emancipatory practice through renewed attention to and performative exploration of the ‘relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ i.e. the human community, by reappropriating and renewing modernist techniques (ethnography, surrealism, conceptual art, essayism, critical theory) with the communicative resources afforded by the late-20th and early-21st century.



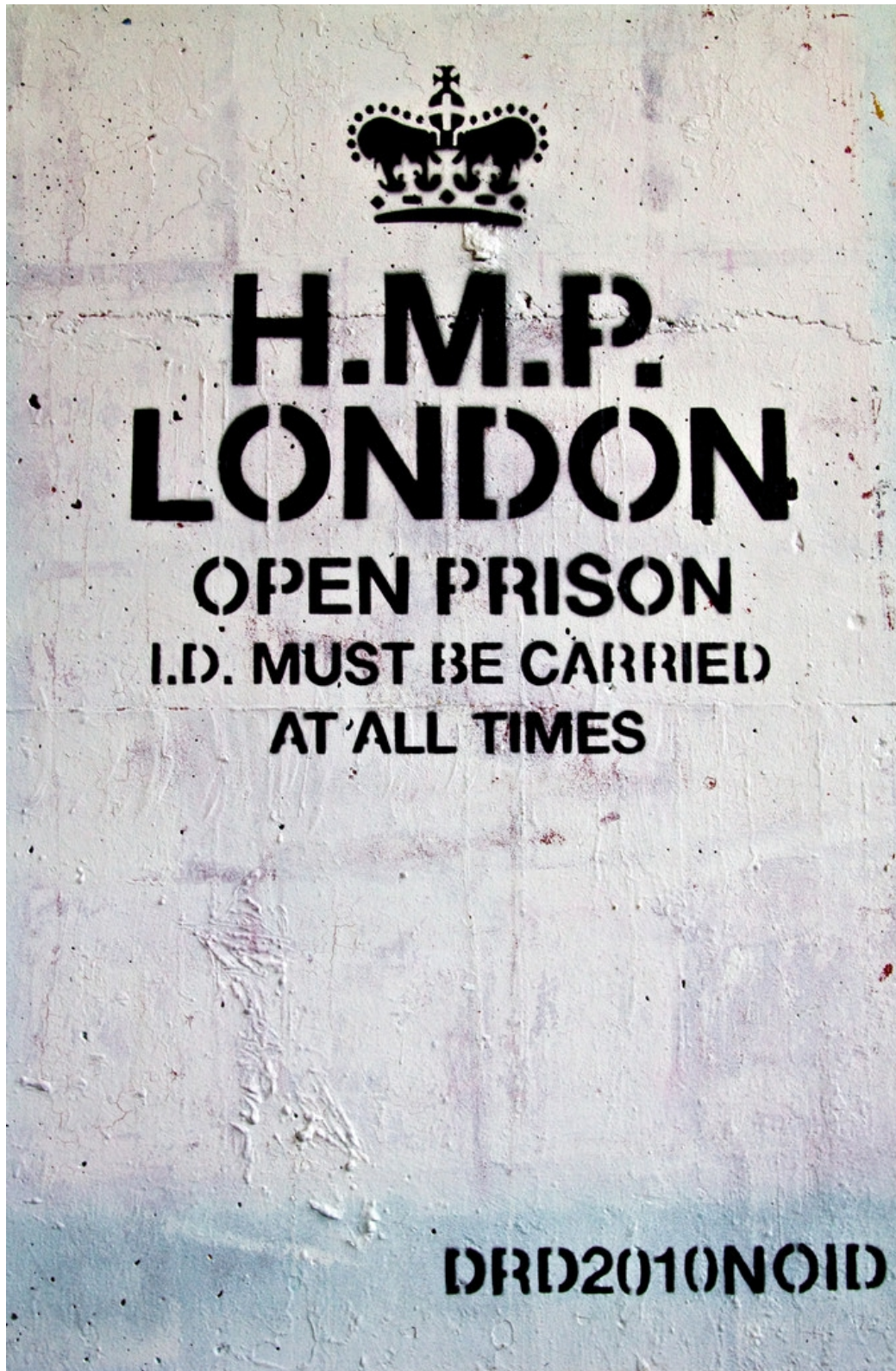


Image: Anon., Graffiti, London, c.2010

# Inventory's Contribution to the Criticism of Capitalist Urbanism

*Inventory's* contribution to the criticism of capitalist urbanism in London is to have foregrounded struggle as a central dynamic in every urban process – every plan and every building. In this, they inherited Lefebvre's theoretical framework and its problems, and they tended, in apparent agreement with contemporaries such as activist group Reclaim the Streets, to limit themselves on occasion to an aesthetic critique, one associated with romantic anti-capitalism, which, as it manifested in the 1990s, tended towards the celebration of 'ephemeral hedonisms' moments of apparent 'freedom' in the otherwise colonised areas where the 'capitalist production of space [...] smothers everyday life'.<sup>184</sup> Such critiques posit forms of play and 'creative exchange' as forming a kind of wishful opposition to capitalism's organisation and division of production and exchange. That these represent terrains of struggle is a persuasive analysis, but that they can, either in textual analysis or prefigurative action, provide a terminal resistance to capitalism, rather than a space to exercise and concentrate energies of negation, is misleading. Thus, these criticisms aside, in *Inventory's* urban critiques and their actions, there are forms of understanding, criticism and insight which provide tools with which to understand the London as a city during a period of great transformation – one in which the structural arrangement of the city and the organisation of life in it changed dramatically. Whilst the journal sought to embody mimetic relationships with the city itself, and through print and other forms of inscription dissolve itself into the streets themselves, these were not at the expense of forms of analysis. *Inventory's* urban case studies forced the group to concretise the abstractions derived from the theorists they engaged with (Bataille, Benjamin and Lefebvre) and read their wider reflections directly out of the phenomena they found in the field. Formally this is achieved by developing the project of 'mimetic criticism', announced by the proposition of the 'method of a fierce sociology', in direct response to urban phenomena, that is (following Simmel and Benjamin) phenomena contained within an environment which deadens the experience of them, by pursuing these phenomena in 'close-up' through the essay, joining objective study with subjective experience, the essay as form becomes one with its object, criticism becomes inseparable from the object it criticises, title and name are drawn into unity, for example as in 'Elephant'.<sup>185</sup> The force of *Inventory's* critique issues from its negation of 'everyday life as poverty and prison' in terms of a prior structuring of life in capital as planned metabolism between the state,

184 On 'ephemeral hedonisms', see Tarfuri, "'Gay errancy'" op. cit. Other quotations in this sentence from 'Open Yet Excluded', op. cit., p.89.

185 Which is the title of Adam Scrivener's essay; name for the shopping centre, the area around it and in a more diffuse sense names the strange and enigmatic phenomena the essay seeks to illuminate.

capital and labour, and in terms of the emerging new structuring of the city, identified by *Inventory*, as a logic of inclusive exclusion rendering London an ‘open prison’.<sup>186</sup> It is my contention that these will be contributions to this project only if they gesture not to a life beyond or outside of capital’s clutches, but rather connect up fully with the critical forces at work in spheres of life under capital both those directly mediated by it and indirectly mediated – i.e. reproduction/circulation and production. Such an equipment of critical forces will spring from already existing struggles and new and unforeseeable ones, from tensions and coincidences between the knowledge of the past and the absolutely urgent task of abolishing the present state of things.<sup>187</sup>

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186 Guy Debord, ‘Perspectives for the Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life’, in *Situationist International Anthology*, Ken Knabb, Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, p.71, quoted in ‘Open Yet Excluded’, op. cit., p.89. A popular street graffiti during the 2000s announced to visitors to the city, welcome to ‘HMP London: Open Prison’.

187 I allude to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur, London: Lawrence & Wishart 1970, p.57.

# Conclusions

What I have attempted here is a combined critical evaluation and intellectual history of the journal, *Inventory*, foregrounding the conceptualisation of the journal as a printed object and its contribution to print culture drawing upon recent research on the media histories of printed matter, documents, periodicals and artist's publications.

I have argued that *Inventory*'s temporal distance from the period in which Bataille and Benjamin were writing allowed them to develop a syncretic but original interpretation of Bataille's thought that was openly mediated by that of Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School, other surrealists, the later (surrealist-inspired) Lettrist and Situationist Internationals, and postmodern, ethnographic and critical theory contemporary with *Inventory*'s own theoretical production. Nonetheless, I have argued that within this constellation Bataille and Benjamin's presences are a determining influence over and through the other currents in discussion.

Chapter 1 began by investigating the journal as a material object arranged through the print conventions it reproduced. I discussed the journal firstly as form and secondly the journal and publishing as a field of cultural influence and models (Chapter 2). Chapters 3 and 4 transformed the focus of Chapter 2 by providing motivation for the use of the journal form as a means of producing aesthetic experience, critical judgement, knowledge and self-organisation (association or assembly). The discussions in chapters 3 and 4 turned to complex methodological debates to examine what philosophical, ontological and epistemological frameworks motivated the use of the journal, 'never a dumb vessel', as 'a means'.<sup>1</sup> In summary, Walter Benjamin's critique of Immanuel Kant's account of experience and perception establishes human experience in capitalist modernity as a problem for philosophy, sociology and aesthetic theory. Alienation – the relation of the subject as an object for, and motor of, capital's valorisation process and the human environment as constituted by other commodities – necessitates self-mediation. Human subjects in capitalism do not make themselves, they are entrained to treat each other as objects through relations of exchange and contribute to their own unfreedom by reproducing capital as a social relation. The journal becomes the form (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5) through which *Inventory* mediate their experience of phenomena in capitalism as a process of the mutual transformation of subjects and objects, this is thought of as both research and self-fashioning (sovereignty). This search for experience and association with others seeks to move beyond the restrictions of idealism, to address modernity dynamically and move *scientifically* beyond bourgeois science and *politically* beyond bourgeois (social) democracy,

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1 Respectively quotations from *Inventory*, 'Fierce Sociology' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.5-8, p.5 and 'For a Sociology', op. cit., p.4.

and within the trajectory of this movement are multiple debts to Kant, Hegel and Marx, Simmel, Durkheim and others.<sup>2</sup> Where the influence of Georges Bataille and the hybrid ‘sacred sociology’ or ‘surrealist ethnography’ he developed meets these concerns is in both a radical and heterodox cosmological reframing of the themes of enlightenment and in the suggestion of the outline of a praxis which *Inventory* attempted to follow through on by staging hybrid literary, artistic, sociological inquiries into thinghood, commodification and community (or its absence) in late 20th century capitalist society. Bataille’s work (in which the roles of editor, philosopher and political organiser/agitator are not distinct but rather articulated integrally as a practice) and that of his fellow travellers provides for *Inventory* a necessary sociological supplement to the critical theory tradition (Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer) itself suffering its own internal crises and mired by its conservative turn (Habermas) by the end of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> This sociological supplement can be identified with the account of ‘surrealist ethnography’ articulated by James Clifford or the position of the ‘artist as ethnographer’ theorised by Hal Foster in the early-1990s but, exploring debates surrounding these two formulations, I have argued that *Inventory* distinguish themselves precisely from both these conceptualisations by developing their own complex heterodox method and putting this into practice not through ‘art’ or ‘sociology’ but through the journal as a platform for ‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ form and critical thought, one which enables a strongly pragmatic and critical perspective on separate and specialist disciplines.

Syncretism and hybridity was a new norm in the pluralistic postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s, however, *Inventory*’s work has been shown to resist a certain form of this pluralism through its strong fidelity to an ethnographic-sociological approach, fierce independence (and reflection on two ways of conceiving that independence: autonomy and sovereignty) and the specific contribution of reviving theory integrated within a broad and open practice whose object was the social totality which directed it therefore *against* the more fragmentary and relativist perspectives championed by postmodernism.<sup>4</sup>

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2 The question of when, where and how *Inventory* absorbed these elements is of interest but not always crucial, the assumption from the beginning is that they engaged in a deeply syncretic reading of all these sources, at certain moments we know *Inventory* read Theodor Adorno, Georges Bataille, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Roger Caillois, James Clifford, Leo Shestov, Georg Simmel and others encountered in this chapter because they cite each of these thinkers in their writings, it is evident that each of these thinkers channel Kant, Hegel and Marx’s thought in different combinations, where relevant I shall attempt to be as accurate as possible, but the point is to be accurate about the ideas as they are transmitted with a charge still relevant to present or past problems, not the precise and detailed tracking of the cultural transmission of ideas.

3 The various crises of the critical theory tradition are compellingly mapped out in Stewart Martin, ‘Adorno and the Problem of Philosophy’, op. cit., pp.14-15

4 See Robin Mackay, ‘Retro Retard’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.30-35. This text discussed in the previous chapter, is worth considering at further length in relation to the editorials to Vol.2 No.3, ‘Fierce Sociology’ and Vol.3 No.1, ‘Do You Feel Crushed’ as responses to Mackay’s critiques and other ‘problems, confusions, and misunderstandings’ about *Inventory*’s position. *Inventory*, ‘Do You Feel Crushed’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1, 1998, pp.4-8, p.4.



By situating both Georges Bataille and Walter Benjamin as central correspondents to *Inventory*'s writing and publishing practice, significant connections, correspondences and divergences have been drawn out between Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Roger Caillois, Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Leiris, Collette Peignot, Lev Shestov and Simone Weil. These associations and correspondences in turn are mapped onto the 'paper assembly' of diverse contemporary thinkers, writers and groups whom *Inventory* drew together through their journal. Making connections between these thinkers is a fundamental aspect of how *Inventory* and their expanded pool of contributors built a web of association, authority and discourse, we can say it is the *ensemble* wherein their *sovereignty* and singularity consisted, and this is of major and lasting significance for their intellectual and artistic contribution. This approach legitimates comparing and mapping correspondences in the work of these thinkers and re-examining their claims by measuring amplification of such claims in the work of *Inventory* against them. In the subsequent chapter I show how the journal as form carries a conceptual register which relates to these debates and materialises them differently. In Chapter 6, in the context of their contemporaries I have shown how the journal responded amongst practices which carried out comparable programmes of self-publishing. The journal's editors propose a method and suggest proximity to a number of models of knowledge: ethnography, sociology, art, critical theory, religion, philosophy, literature, poetry, science each of which has a relation to encyclopedic knowledge, but, since none of these models is settled upon, the object deliberately alloys itself against being understood through a specific concept.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, following Jan Mukařovsky, this aesthetic function does not dominate 'all other functions' in the journal.<sup>6</sup> I take seriously in disciplinary terms, for example, *Inventory*'s contribution to late-20th century urban studies.<sup>7</sup> The ground for the hybrid enquiry proposed by *Inventory*'s method, established in Chapters 3 and 4, was late-20th century London. The survey of *Inventory*'s urban studies, in Chapter 7, shows how these analytical tools illuminated the problems of the city and the problem of human experience and life within it.

My approach to this complex whole has involved attention to the sensuous qualities of the object itself; the tactile qualities of the experience of reading writing; interactions of image, text and typography and the experience of readership of an assembly of contributions in both each given issue of the journal and across the set forming the complete run of the journal.<sup>8</sup>

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5 The aforementioned method 'fierce sociology' remains a central object of study in this thesis, but my contention here is that it serves more of a provocative and polemical role with regard to the production of knowledge, but it does not encompass everything *Inventory* themselves produced.

6 Jan Mukarovsky, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, (Trans. Mark E. Suino), Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1979, p.2.

7 This is the focus of Chapter 5.

On the other hand, *Inventory*'s ethnographically informed methodology and practical field research are of interest to anthropology and ethnography but they present a challenge to it, and, outside of a few specific contributions, would not amount to much assessed solely on its terms. My study has proceeded by understanding *Inventory*'s material through the dialectical relation of extra-aesthetic material and aesthetic material. *Inventory* is considered in terms of its relation to what Adorno calls, 'art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social*', that is, in its binding to the ruling mode of social production and social labour through the use of extra-artistic material and its autonomy from the same through its refusal of socially necessary labour and practical critique of existing social practice.<sup>9</sup> In its alterity to existing disciplines and other models of publishing, the journal establishes a critical position in dialogue with the limitations of the disciplines it mimetically associated itself with. Therefore, *Inventory*'s rejection of art, critical association with other disciplines forms a binding relation to the social through opposition: 'art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it.'<sup>10</sup> This criticism of social utility, alongside *Inventory*'s stated aim to 'explore the various economies of social life through social situations'<sup>11</sup>, is, I argue, a form of aesthetic critique, or at least a form of critical thinking which draws upon aesthetic critique, one which is not self-evident, nor immutable, but requires, for its activation and critical purchase, the complex interaction of subject (reader) and object (journal or essay) and its reading within a dynamic social context. Furthermore, in a period in which art's 'usefulness' has 'permeated the field of social practice', a renewed critical discussion of what binds art to inutility and the criticism of social utility is paramount, and *Inventory* present a particularly interesting case study in this field.<sup>12</sup> For Adorno, all advanced art is critical of society, '[a]rt's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate

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8 These are approaches to experimental printed matter developed by Drucker, op. cit., (2004 and 2013) and Thoburn (2010 and 2016).

9 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), London; New York: Continuum Press, 1997, p.5. This quotation emphasises the dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy crucial to understanding Adorno's account of autonomous art. Secondly, and mostly overlooked in work on Adorno's aesthetic theory is its relation to the Durkheimian term *fait social* – social fact or socially made thing. The relation of Adorno's theory to Émile Durkheim's work is of particular interest in this study because *Inventory*'s work inherits a working interpretation of Durkheim's concepts through the strongly determining influence of Georges Bataille. Chapter 2 aims to prove exactly this. I shall argue that the study, experience and transformation of social facts is a central aspect of *Inventory* journal's original contribution to the critical theory tradition. *Inventory* discuss the link between *fait social* and art explicitly in a text on Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, in *Inventory*, 'On Art, Politics and Relational Aesthetics', *Inventory*, Vol.5, No.2 & 3, 2005, pp.166-181.

10 Ibid., p.225-226.

11 A 'spokesperson' for *Inventory* quoted in Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, London: Flamingo, 2002, p.31.

12 Larne Abse Gogarty, "'Usefulness" in Contemporary Art and Politics', *Third Text*, Vol.31, No.1, December 2017, pp.117–132.

society.’<sup>13</sup> The principle of negation is explored in the interwar writings of Georges Bataille in terms of form, in art works (modern and so-called ‘primitive art’), literature and politics: ‘Art [...] proceeds in this sense through successive destructions.’<sup>14</sup> I argue that *Inventory* took on and enacted procedures of negation through the development of forms of criticism of late-20th century society, and that they ‘proceeded through successive destructions’ by instituting a series of rules and categories through establishing a journal format, modelled in significant ways on Bataille’s *Documents*, with rules which they then systematically transgressed and deformed. *Inventory* developed approaches in line with both Bataille and Benjamin’s insights in order to develop original approaches to contemporary phenomena whilst retaining a view of the complex totality. *Inventory* then was an evolving, yet incomplete, anthology or storehouse of these attempts. The lasting contribution of the journal is that remains a restless system, a complex of very diverse contributions, in itself systematic but open to future readers and researchers.

In my opinion my approach has satisfactorily answered the questions posed in the introduction to the thesis. However, this has necessitated certain omissions.

My omission of discussions of gender both in the journal and as a concern of this thesis is something that will have to be made good on in future work. An Index of Categories in the appendices provides a list of female contributors. Their work has been discussed as and when it resonated with the themes, but deserves, along with many other unexplored contributions, to be approached more directly and singularly. One text in particular reflects on a potentially feminist and anti-ableist critique of exactly those themes. Alongside the question of contributors, gender and sex is approached in theoretical terms or anthropological terms by a small number of contributors; surrealist women Unica Zurn and Collette Peignot are the subject of two focused studies; questions of reproductive labour are implicated in several diagrammatic texts (these are glossed in the Appendices to this study).

There is a complex racial, political and philosophical dimension to the appropriation of ethnographic technique which has been broached but not satisfactorily investigated due to limits of time and word count. Within this, *Inventory*’s affirmation of ‘life’ against the integration of working class life into the circuit of capital would potentially provide an optic through which to draw into view further analyses and disentangling of the journal’s hostility to both categorical and capitalist forms of subsumption.

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13 *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit., p.226.

14 Georges Bataille, ‘Primitive Art’, *Documents*, No.7, 1930, translated in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*. London: Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006, p.127.

The meaning of *Inventory* as a list or index of commercial stock implying the survey of a world of things – ‘material phenomena’ – presented on a levelling plane of fungibility, provides therefore a form of mimesis of a commercial mode of seeing objects not in their particularity but in their exchangeability, as prices and quantities, rather than qualities. Viewing *Inventory* therefore as providing a discourse on the commodity, the central form of capitalist society, is another perspective which I have provided with glimpses of, but would, I believe, provide further illumination if placed centrally in a differently organised study.

That none of these three areas have been sufficiently thoroughly addressed is both something of a regret and a motivation for further work. This thesis therefore represents only a first attempt, or ‘essay’, at providing a critical survey of *Inventory* journal.

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Rebecca Bligh	Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005
Richard Bradbury	Vol.3 No.3 1999
Alexander Brener & Barbara Schurz	Vol.4 No.3 2002, Vol.5 No.1 2003
Ranko Bon	Vol.1 No.2 1996, Vol.1 No.3 1996
Lesley Chan	Vol.5 No.1 2003
Neil Chapman	Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005
John Churcher	Vol.2 No.2, 1997
Garrison Clarke	Vol.2 No.2, 1997, Vol.2 No.1 1997
Steve Claydon & Neil Chapman	Vol.3 No.2 1999, Vol.3 No.3 1999
Paul Claydon	Vol.1 No.1 1995, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, Vol.3 No.1 1998, Vol.3 No.3 1999, Vol.4 No.1 2000, Vol.4 No.3 2002
John Cussans	Vol.4 No.3 2002
Nicoleta Esinencu	Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005
evoL PsychogeogrAphix	Vol.4 No.3 2002
Krzysztof Fijalkowski	
Michael Fehr	Vol.2 No.2 1997
Gracie Goldsack	Vol.1 No.3 1996
Victoria Halford	Vol.3 No.3 1999, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005
Sean Harding	Vol.3 No.3 1999
Jan Harris	Vol.3 No.2 1999
Matthew Hyland	Vol.4 No.2 2001, Vol.5 No.1 2003
Inventory & Gautier Deblonde	Vol.1 No.2 1996
Institute of Open Studies	Vol.4 No.1 2000, Vol.5 No.1 2003, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005
Jakob Jakobsen	Vol.3 No.2 1999, Vol.4 No.1 2000
Mark Jamieson	Vol.4 No.2 2001
Martin Jenkins	Vol.1 No.3 1996
Joseph the Prophet	Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005
Kingsland Passage	Vol.5 No.1 2003
Denise Kum	Vol.4 No.2 2001
Laurent Van Lancker	Vol.1 No.2 1996, Vol.1 No.3 1996
Giles Lazare	Vol.3 No.2 1999
Esther Leslie	Vol.4 No.2 2001
Joe Lewis	Vol.5 No.1 2003
Daniel Love Peacock	Vol.3 No.2 1999, Vol.4 No.2 2001

L. C-O. H. Kugler	<b>Vol.2 No.3 1997</b>
Robin Mackay	<b>Vol.1 No.2 1996</b>
Keith Miller	<b>Vol.1 No.3 1996, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, Vol.4 No.2 2001</b>
Lara Mushkat	<b>Vol.3 No.1 1998</b>
Simon Neville	<b>Vol.1 No.2 1996, Vol.1 No.3 1996, Vol.2 No.2 1997, Vol.2 No.3 1997, Vol.3 No.1 1998, Vol.3 No.3 1999</b>
Daniel Norton	<b>Vol.3 No.1 1998,</b>
Nick Norton	<b>Vol.1 No.1 1995, Vol.1 No.2 1996, Vol.1 No.3 1996, Vol.2 No.1 1997, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, Vol.3 No.1 1998, Vol.3 No.2 1999, Vol.4, No.3 2002, Vol.5 No.1 2003</b>
Jeff Peacock	<b>Vol.3 No.1 1998</b>
Eric C. Puryear	<b>Vol.1 No.2 1996</b>
Stanley Owen-Green	<b>Vol.2 No.1 1997</b>
Max Reeves	<b>Vol.4 No.2 2001, Vol.5 Nos.2 &amp; 3 2005</b>
Michael Richardson	<b>Vol.2 No.3 1997, Vol.4 No.3 2002, Vol.5 Nos.2 &amp; 3 2005</b>
Michael Ricketts	<b>Vol.2 No.1 1997</b>
Adam Scrivener	<b>Vol.1 No.1 1995, Vol.1 No.2 1996, Vol.1 No.3 1996, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, Vol.3 No.2 1999, Vol.3 No.3 1999, Vol.4 No.3 2002</b>
Maria Seiler	<b>Vol.3 No.2 1999</b>
Rakesh Sidhu	<b>Vol.3 No.2 1999, Vol.4 No.2 2001</b>
Tony deSilva	<b>Vol.1 No.1 1995</b>
Ian Simmons	<b>Vol.4 No.1 2000</b>
Iain Sinclair	<b>Vol.2 No.1 1997</b>
Alan Sondheim	<b>Vol.4 No.1 2000</b>
Calum Storrie	<b>Vol.2 No.2, 1997</b>
Catherine Swire	<b>Vol.1 No.3 1996</b>
Ian Trowell	<b>Vol.5 No.1 2003</b>
Julian Walker	<b>Vol.3 No.1 1998</b>
Patrick Ward	<b>Vol.4 No.1 2000</b>

# **Index of Categories of Writing in *Inventory* Journal**

*This index is an attempt to group and characterise categories of marginal or liminal writing published in Inventory. In acknowledgement of the editors of Inventory's own commitment to a disorganised defiance of category and convention, a commitment to heterogeneity, this is only a partial and in some senses redundant effort. As we see, the found texts leak from the essays to glossary section. Artistic projects initially seem like a firm category, where, for example Max Reeves' project Glamour runs across the space of the journal, but each of Nick Norton's 'essays' could equally be designated as a 'project', indeed if the whole container is art then what would be the meaning of other artworks within. From these efforts to group and read the connections between the different bodies of writing we shall see that there are different parts – differently configured 'fragments' – from which a 'whole' is not so much fully assembled or unified as sketched as a moving ensemble. There are units within it, associations, likenesses and solidarities but these frequently disturb or leak across the categories imposed upon them.*

## **Alternation Between Action and Writing**

*These are texts in which a specific activity or group action is reported upon, documented or theorised in Inventory.*

Inventory, 'Coagulum', 'Inventory Survey Project', 'Urban Odyssey', Jakob Jakobsen, 'The Switch', Various, 'Comply', 'Censorship at the Royal Academy', 'Outlier', 'Travelling Without Moving'.

## **Diagrammatic Texts**

*These texts are either entirely arranged as diagrams, depend on an integration of text and image which restructures the text format, or contain a significantly 'diagrammatic' element.*

Neil Chapman & Steven Claydon, 'The Approach'; 'The Opposite of a Good Idea' Joseph the Prophet, 'Joseph's Christian Circus', Nick Norton 'Metalanglinguistica: Siege'; 'EvilEye Live'; 'Would You Believe it a Report Beyond Zero'.

## **Collage, Epistolary and Radio texts**

*These texts present different models of collaged texts, some highly novel in their deep trawling of new forms of subjective or political expression and forums for epistolary exchange. Whether directly, or indirectly engaged with new technology, each of these original text formats is haunted by the suggestive possibilities of hypertextual and a non-linear writing technologies. They are explored here both in an effort to establish their originality and discuss historical models of writing that may or may not help elucidate their novel configurations of form and content.*

Damian Abbott, 'Paper Assembly', Nick Norton, 'Haptic Radio', Giorgio Agostini, Sites For A Sound Piece, Steve Beard 'Dead London', Institute of Open Studies, 'In a Street', Neil Chapman & Steven Claydon, 'The Approach', Richard Bradbury, 'Granted Ground', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, Evol Psychogeographix, 'A Collection Of Emails', Vol.4 No.3 2002.

## **Visionary and Prophetic Texts**

These are essays, rants and experimental texts which invoke, make mimesis of or directly analyse forms of prophecy, magic or religion, mortal or limit experiences. They have a spatial relation to *Inventory's* urban studies discussed in Chapter 5 because they seek liminal experiences – drunkenness, lost-ness, death, excess, not-knowing – and explorations of belief systems, or simply beliefs, peripheral to the Western Judao-Christian tradition. My contention is that these texts are not to be treated anthropologically (though some of their subject matter has been approached by the discipline), and this is not how *Inventory* frame them. They open onto, profound concerns about the relationship of form and anti-form in cultural traditions.

Kingsland Passage, 'The Last Days of London'; Joseph the Prophet, 'Joseph's Christian Circus'; Nick Norton, 'EvilEye Live'; Nick Norton, 'Unsettled Pattern', Vol.5 No.1 2003; Steve Beard, 'Jack the Mack Prophecies', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005; Steve Beard 'Dead London'; Iain Sinclair, 'Skating on Thin Eyes', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997; Adam Scrivener, 'Requiem For The Empty Quarter'; *Inventory*, 'Outlier', Vol.4 No.3 2002; *Inventory*, 'Death' and 'Beyond', Glossary, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005; Adam Scrivener, 'Tagging', Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.1. No.2, 1996.

## Contributions by Women

*There is no particular reason for grouping these other by the fact that they are ‘outliers’, a minority, and exception in terms of the gender of the contributor. Not counting the found texts of which a number appear to be produced by women, since these are not authored as such. Many are formidable contributions (on specialist topics such as money and witchcraft) and represent a significant increase in female representation compared to most of the magazines and journals Inventory was modelled on (Art-Language, Documents each containing zero contributions by women). They do not however constitute a feminist area in Inventory, but rather participate in the journal’s heterogeneity, and do, on occasion, approach issues of gender and the power of women in society (e.g. Swire, Becker, Halford).*

Catherine Swire, ‘On Pocahontas’, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.20–25; Felicitas Becker, ‘Christianity, Witchcraft and Capitalism’, Vol.2 No.3 1997, pp.24–31; Lara Mushkat, ‘Electricity’, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.48; Jan Harris, ‘Behold The Lamb’, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.8–13; Maria Seiler, ‘Indigestible’, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.43–49; Victoria Halford & Steve Beard, ‘Torture Cell Tapes’, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.52–74; Becky Beasley, ‘Measurement of Prolificacy’, p.17; Victoria Halford, ‘Contract’, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.94–97; Michelle Berber, ‘A Representation of Rhythms’, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.13–33; Josephine Berry, ‘Another Orwellian Misnomer’, Vol.4 No.1 2000, pp.58–83; Clare Gasson, ‘Scaffolding’, Vol.4 No.1 2000, p.92; Esther Leslie, ‘Notes on Notes’, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.28–47; Denise Kum, ‘Focussing Attention’, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.123–124; Alexander Brener & Barbara Schurz, ‘The Necessity Of A Cultural Revolution’, Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.80–91; Michelle Barber, ‘The Point of Departure’, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.14–25; Lesley Chan, ‘Tattoo’, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.43–55; Steve Beard & Victoria Halford, ‘Golems’, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.56–71; Alexander Brener & Barbara Schurz, ‘Fuck Off Assholes!’, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.128–134; Amanda Beech, ‘On Violent Ground’, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.14–31; Rebecca Bligh, ‘Take a Shot’, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.42–43; Nicoleta Esinencu, ‘Fuck You, Eu.ro. Pa!’, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.90–106; Victoria Halford, ‘Selfeedee’, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.124–137.

## Artists’ Projects

Peter Inch, ‘Four Drawings’, Vol.2 No.3, 1997, pp.90–93; Steven Claydon & Neil Chapman, ‘The Opposite of a Good Idea’, Vol.3, No.1, 1999, Insert pp.50–51; Victoria Halford & Steve Beard, ‘Torture Cell Tapes’, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp. 52–74; Steve Claydon & Neil Chapman, ‘The Approach’, Vol.3 No.3, 1999, pp.98–109; Victoria Halford, ‘Contract’, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.94–97; Paul Claydon, ‘Animal Light’, Vol.3 No.1 1998, 31–41; John Cussans, ‘The Shining Maze’, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.118–121; Max Reeves, ‘Glamour’, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.26–27, 67, 85, 99, 109, 117, 122, 125; Giorgio Agostini, ‘Sites For A Sound Piece’, Vol.4 No.3 2002, pp.50–68; Max Reeves, ‘Rorschach Test’, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.31–41; Paul Archer, ‘Archers Best 100 Band Names’, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.162–163.

## Found Texts

Certain events	a found text, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.1 No.1 1995
Time to go Only	A Found Text, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.1 No.3 1996
Anagram	Found Text, Glossary, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.2 No.3 1997
Die	Found Text, Glossary, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.2 No.3 1997
Illusions	Found Text, Glossary, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.2 No.3 1997
Eight Passion Proteins With Care	Stanley Owen-Green, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.2 No.1 1997
Kiki	A Found Text, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.2 No.3 1997
Motto	A Found Text, Glossary, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.3 No.1 1998
Time to Go Only	A Found Text, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.3 No.1 1998
The General at Sex	A Found Text, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.3 No.1 1998
These People	A Found Text, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.3 No.1 1998
Spirits	Found Text (notes by Daniel Love Peacock), Glossary, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.3 No.2 1999
Joseph's Christian Circus	Joseph the Prophet, <i>Inventory</i> , Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005



# Interviews

## Interview with Adam Scrivener

*Adam and I met in person through two visits to Toulouse and Adam's passing visits to London. I made this interview with him in Toulouse in August, 2017.*

AI: Do you remember when and how you first encountered Georges Bataille?

AS: Yes, one of my colleagues at Middlesex had a copy of *Visions of Excess* and that was... there was something in the air at that time. He also, I haven't got those here, but he also used to print this a4 photocopied sheet and he used to call it his review and he used to stick it around. And it was through him and others like him that I became interested in that. I was already interested in Dada and surrealism and Duchamp's readymade. I was interested and that came along. We used to go over to compendium bookshop at that time, so it was through that really.

AI: Did you attend the conference on Bataille at the AA?

AS: Yes, I'd forgotten about that. I've still kept the card and agenda somewhere of the speakers... That's where I met John Cussans and Tom McCarthy [...] Yeah, I took time off to go to the opening and I attended all of that. That was very important too.

AI: Did it take place over several days.

[...]

[John Cussans presented at the conference, he lived in Dalston]

AI: Can you remember much about John Cussans text?<sup>1</sup>

AS: He insisted it should be like that which was a real headache, it was really difficult for us to do. [...] In fact once Damian and I did a pirate radio broadcast from his flat in Dalston, just for the hell of it. We set the frequency so that it would interrupt with Radio 4, or something. I don't know if anyone heard it but we tried to jam a station within the immediate area of Dalston. [laughter]

AI: Then there's this 'Violent Silent' festival (organised by Paul Buck) from really early, 1984?

AS: I only knew about it from the book, I have the copy of it here. That was another thing [through which I got me interested]... it was the little magazines collection. Once I started working at SOAS, I was a member of staff at the University of London, I discovered the Little Magazines collection at UCL and we ended up doing a show of the magazine [*Inventory*] and we gave them copies for that collection. They have a collection of Paul Buck's almost just stapled, photocopied, typewritten things in their collection. So, I looked at some of that, but that wasn't the sort of Bataille I was interested in, all this kind of gothic, erotic horror.

AI: That's the thing that for me, that in the '90s that's what Bataille seemed to me to be about. And I remembered reading *Inventory*, there was a different take.

AS: This is the thing. Anyone can do that, perhaps it's a little cavalier, but anyone can just take a

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<sup>1</sup> John Cussans, 'The Shining Maze', *Inventory*, Vol.4 No.2 2001, pp.118–121.

part of an author's work and just disregard the rest. Maybe that's a bit cavalier from a philosophical point of view [...] but we were more, like artists do, you know just take stuff and disregard the rest.

AI: You mentioned a discussion with Michael Bracewell at the Hayward Gallery?

AS: I think it must have been Michael Richardson who passed our name on, but we just got an email from the Hayward inviting us to give a talk. [*Undercover Surrealism*] It was decided that I would do it, so I did, but Paul and Damian were there. And then there was that guy called Ken Hollings and this bloke who does this thing called *Strange Attractor*.

AI: Any other memorable impressions of the exhibition, *Undercover Surrealism*? Did it feel that it was closer to your interpretation of Bataille?

AS: I discussed it with Neil Cummings once, [...] and he thought it was a bit didactic and literal. Yeah, I thought it was alright, but then when he mentioned that I agreed, it was almost as if they had turned the pages out and put it all on the wall. There was also that little bit of instrumentalisation, you know that aspect in British culture when it goes into a big museum and address a larger audience and more or less plays to the lowest common denominator. They more or less erased all of the controversial issues to do with ethnicity. For all of that ethnographic surrealism and the surrealist map of the world you know, France was and still is as racist as anywhere else in Europe and North America. And for all of their enlightened aspects and trying to undermine Western civilisation, it wasn't totally politically correct let's say. And they smoothed some of that over, from what I remember.

AI: I'm interested in Aimé Césaire. There is some good academic writing about, on the one hand this kind of heterophilia in Bataille's dissident surrealism and the surrealist projection onto jazz music, and on the other, the transmission to Aimé Césaire. Donna V. Jones talks about Césaire almost taking on and developing this sort of Bergsonian vitalism, producing an anti-racist vitalism projecting onto Caribbean culture. Obviously he is also an interesting figure in his own right in Martinique. She talks a bit about the politics of that [conjunction]. I remember being at UEA and [surrealism was part of this] way of introducing non-western art and architecture and modernism was to connect it to surrealism and to see it as an anti-imperialist project.

AS: You know there's a famous picture of Josephine Baker in the Musée de L'homme when it was refurbished, and from our perspective that looks really out of order. But on the other hand, you know I was watching this James Baldwin documentary, and he was saying he felt more free in France, and he was saying how he felt more comfortable and that it was less racist. So, it was more open for African-Americans or people from other countries. It doesn't really square with Man Ray's image of a woman lying holding a mask, these naff, exoticist images that you get in surrealist photography.

AI: George Dumezil, who was briefly Director of the Musée de L'homme [which is in the photo] talks about that, arranging that, argues that these experiments and this form of heterophilia towards blackness was a way to break the racism in French culture. There is an interesting link with anti-racist or anti-imperialist politics because that, there was a cell that they more or less formed out of the Museum staff [who went underground] to fight against the German occupation. But as an [anti-racist politics] it is very vague and full of strange projections, of essentialism really. If that wasn't a part of the exhibition, did you find a more nuanced debate taking place at SOAS around these issues?

AS: Yes, well. Absolutely, I mean not necessarily on this course on the Anthropology of Art and Aesthetics, but in the ambience around SOAS generally. During the first Gulf War there were police outside all the time and there were constant debates around the legality of all of that. In the bar there you would meet people from all over the world, people were critical of Nelson Mandela, that he was just some kind of white puppet and nothing was going to change, there were serious discussions going on all the time about all sorts of things. I've got this readymade I was going to put in the journal but never did [shows]... there was a much more frank discussions, also to do with Islam, there were many people. Obviously a large number of people who came there were from wealthy backgrounds.

AI: Do you remember any notable art works from the period of *Inventory*'s formation, i.e. mid-to-late 1990s. My examples were Fiona Banner, *Solar Anus*, Henry Bond and Liam Gillick, *Documents*, (press passes), Cerith Wyn Evans. Thinking of *Inventory* as a journal... was there a self-consciousness at the time within *Inventory* that some people were making these allusive artworks, but the journal represented a slower and deeper engagement to make a journal that had elements of *Documents* or the College of Sociology? [...] Is there anything else you can think of

AS: There is. I brought this in *Compendium*, they only made one issue, but I was reluctant to show you because you might think we might have ripped it off, but honestly it wasn't that direct. But it's very...

AI: ...more academic

AS: Yeah. And this sort of Postmodern discourse. And all of this [pointing] we weren't interested in that... that was just this perpetual Derridean language play and we just didn't have any time for that.

AI: Bataille has a very interesting relationship to para-academic philosophy and publishing, I'm interested in how he impacted on the UK scene in the 1980s and 1990s. The thesis would be that in the UK somehow made space for philosophy, or philosophic original thought, outside of the academy?

AS: Oh yes. Definitely, I mean Ana thinks he's a philosopher and I keep telling her he's not. I mean he even says that somewhere. I can't remember where. [...] And I don't think he is, at all. Also because we didn't think of ourselves as being particularly competent even, you can even say that. It was liberating in the sense that you could participate in something, in some kind of discourse even without calling yourself that. I mean, even artist was problematic. Yeah, that was part of the exciting thing, which you got generally in surrealism any way, that was already there, in the early days of surrealism

AI: Can you remember how you encountered Walter Benjamin?

AS: It might have been a bit through going to *compendium* but it was more when we met at Chelsea, this was more Paul's obsession really.

AI: Did you know that Benjamin had attended The College of Sociology meetings and did you self consciously, well my take on *Inventory* is kind of a meeting point between Bataille and Benjamin, but do you remember if you were aware of that?

AS: Well obviously we were reliant on things being translated and when The College of Sociology anthology came out and we bought that and it has all of that documented in there.<sup>2</sup> I can't remember when that was now. But yeah that was '88, but we didn't pick that up til later, the early '90s when we were at Chelsea and at the weekends we'd meet up at cafs and wander around London. This was done a lot, there was a lot of wondering around going in bookshops and meeting this guy Martin Jacks (Jakes?), who wrote something for the journal. He was the book buyer for the philosophy department on the first floor of Blackwells on the Charing Cross Road. And then we'd go in there and we'd see him and he'd tell us what was in, and then if we had some money we'd buy stuff. So yes all of that came through that kind of process of, yeah, in second hand bookshops and buying things like this.

AI: Are there any Benjamin texts which are particularly formative in terms of *Inventory*. And then I might as well ask the second question', obviously the initial editorial text for a sociology has this quote from Benjamin's Moscow Diaries.

AS: Yes, Paul found that and then well it was the early things that had been translated for a long time like *One Way Street*, because obviously when it's laid out its more, well he himself is taking these surrealist devices, wanting to. And obviously the last essay 'On Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligensia', those things, really basic quotes [indistinct, laughing] care about.

AI: Was there any discussion about using that as a strapline or using *Inventory* as a title, anything comes to mind?

AS: well that was in this Kings College opposite [unknown] road, I remember we were sitting in there and I think, I came up with this name of *Inventory*, and the subtitles [straplines] came from a previous longer list, which I don't have, but it's from that longer list of type written that have to do with this. There was this longer list of just words and they were culled from there. Nick doesn't remember this but I'm certain that that's where that came from.

AI: So finding, losing, collecting, were generated through that. I've got too many questions about Moscow Diaries. Was there any particular significance of the Moscow Diaries?

AS: Well Paul, you'd have to ask Paul about that. As I say his entire thesis was all on...

AI: Yeah because it's definitely got this kind of, well it's a text that links the city and in a way typography to language, so there's lots of.

AS: well yeah so that is, well for me, more the urban aspect of that kind of almost pre-psycho-geographical, you know *Paris Peasant* which Kieller recommended that I read that when I was at Middlesex. And also that's also where, at Middlesex, that I picked up a copy of *Society of the Spectacle*, an old black and red edition. And all these things sort of floated together later. Yeah it was the urban thing, and as I say as weekends we would often go wandering about.

AI: So collectively you thought of *Inventory* as a journal about the urban, or about London per se or more?

AS: I suppose, I don't know.

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<sup>2</sup> Denis Hollier (Ed.), *The College of Sociology, 1937-39*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

AI: Maybe that's closing that down a bit?

AS: Yeah we weren't necessarily thinking, although obviously that was our immediate environment.

AI: I've got some questions about Patrick Keiller so I might jump onto those. There's this strong sense from the very beginning that *Inventory* is a textual project but also various gestures are made to either the combination of word and image or greater meaning that will go beyond mere reportage of research, experience or preexisting knowledge. Is that a fair characterisation?

AS: Well yeah that's a Benjaminian thing as well, the idea, with the factory chimney and that kind of. Yeah, make a kind of dialectical image of some kind through the interplay of image and text.

AI: And was that, you mentioned a few artworks that you made so that was text often an element that you worked with in your own art practice, it sounds a bit like Damian's interest in Fluxus.

AS: Before?

AI: Yeah before?

AS: Well my own personal things were more like panels which were juxtaposed, not so much text and Paul was doing these kinds of weird minimal looking things that didn't really, I think he was under the influence of some of his teachers there. He had some kind of hardcore minimalist painters, heavily involved with Marxist theory.

AI: Yeah yeah ok

AS: I think that's where the Benjaminian thing came from, via these people. But maybe, yeah I don't know, the Damian text perhaps.

AI: Did you each feel like you had a writing practice before the Chelsea course?

AS: Oh no, I don't think. I wrote a thesis for my degree and I wrote mine on the relationship between language and Duchamp's readymades. So that was the theme between not just the titles but how some of them were inscribed, that was about that but I don't know about the others.

AI: But in a way you ended up with a body of writing that went into the journal from the Chelsea course? [AS: yeah] So was it an initially generative moment?

AS: Well as I said earlier the theory courses at Middlesex weren't that fabulous and I felt lacking in that department and so that's why I went to Chelsea and yeah it was really here that I got more into the idea of trying to do that. I mean I wasn't very confident about it.

AI: Paul's text and yours, especially the 'Elephant' text, come across as pretty competent, either sociological, not purely academic, essay writing.

AS: Well it's exciting because it comes to these sort of insane conclusions, that aren't really justifiable.

AI: yeah it goes off-road from the usual sociological exploration.

AS: That's what was exciting in surrealist writing, even in CAR? [indistinct], it had a sort of rigour but then could veer off, I suppose that's what theory is, it's not so. I mean we come from an analytical tradition. That was the other thing, before I did the course at Chelsea, when I was at SOAS I took an A-Level in philosophy and I went to these classes, somewhere near Hoxton Square, and there we had to do stuff about the philosophy of science and logic and stuff like that. I wanted to push myself into a position where I had to write essays about induction, which I did do. I've got some of them here and these books with all of these notes and I didn't revise very well for the exam and I didn't pass very well, but I did follow it until the end.

AI: And do you feel like surrealism gave you a kind of leaver to push against that or open it up to something more experiential?

AS: Yeah, it's interesting. This class was great and the guy who was teaching it was brilliant, you can see the beauty in how he struck up proper logical arguments and get out of traps and stuff. It was quite interesting but a world away from what they call the continental tradition which is this kind more, doesn't seem to worry about things like that!

AI: I suppose there's that, I know from early conversations, your interests in systems and your lingering interests both in English analytical philosophy and conceptual art and then that, in a way, being opened up to continental philosophy in the UK. Something we maybe mentioned briefly earlier on was Art & Language and I sense that was a bit played out by that point, or it was endemic in UK art schools.

AS: Yeah but none of us knew anything like that, even in the Tate website for the estate map they go on about how the journal looks like Art and Language and that had absolutely nothing to do with it whatsoever, I'd never read that in my life. I don't really know much about them.

AI: I just wondered if it was something pushed by tutors or?

AS: No.

AI: In the thesis I attempt to make the case that *Inventory's* interpretation of surrealism is highly original. I argue specifically that with regards Bataille and his scene this constitutes an original reading in a strongly sociological vein, and that the combination with Benjamin's work this produces a new and experimental form of materialism... I would argue that through these two figures (and perhaps others) you invented a collective practice. Would you say that was a fair characterisation?

AS: Yeah, I mean it wasn't that original perhaps [laughter] that we invented collective practice. I remember we went to see the film, [Patrick Keiller's *London*] I remember exactly it was the Dalston Rio, when it came out and Paul and I went to see it and we both loved it and felt jealous because it signified everything we'd been thinking and he'd got there first. We were very envious, the mixture of fictive and subjective and the raw mix of the camera itself and the play with literary associations and then image.

AI: Also what can seem impressive, I regularly show new friends Keiller's work, and sometimes they are bored to death by it, but some often people are really charmed by it. I guess the last times I went back and watched *London* it seems to manage a neat take on surrealism as a research vehicle inside this account of Englishness, materially economically but also experiential account of what produces the peculiarities of English culture.



AS: Well there's a lot of humour in it as well, which sometimes gets missed. Also there's a lot of humour in *Inventory* as well but no one ever notices that. When I went to California as a candidate for a job at this Arts Centre in Pasadena, I don't know if you know it, but I went over and did this talk and some guy in the audience said 'I never realised before there's a lot of humour' and I said that's the way its meant to be, it's a shame I had to travel thousands of miles to get that. Because a lot of people thought later we were just these thugs and really there was a lot of humour in it.

AI: I think that's something which was refreshing for me, definitely when first encountering *Inventory*. Just a little bit more on surrealism, are there other contending surrealisms you were contesting at the time? Were there readings of surrealism you wanted to refute or develop?

AS: Although we loved Alistair Brochi and got on very well with him, the whole Atlas scene, although we appreciated their work in translations, the whole look of that scene, the whole kind of twee, where does that come from? They sort of make it look whimsical and stupid. Also in the popular imagination you could also go to anyone in the street and say 'surrealism' and someone will know what that means in some way, which is an enormous success for such an obscure and avant-garde art movement. But now it can mean anything from Dali to the latest David Lynch. And really that's the thing that we found irritating, and that was the good thing about *Documents*, that it was a bit more hard edged, it had more of an aspect of a total social fact in all of its brute paradoxical unpleasant. I've come to believe over the years that art is not meant to be entertaining, we're here to make things of course pleasurable, you can get pleasure from difficulty and trying to wrestle with things, and maybe not even have anything that arrives at any competent resolution. It's more about some sort of perpetual struggle with stuff. There's something this lazy in this sort of 'oh no it's too dreamlike'.

AI: Parlour game like?

AS: Yeah exactly, that box of surrealist games. It takes it away from, I mean imagine someone like Bartoll, you imagine he's not the kind of guy who jokes around. That was the interesting thing about photography in surrealism show. And of course we must mention *October*, of course when I was at art school *October* was a massive influence generally but that started to change that view of surrealism as well. Paul and I looked at the other catalogue on surrealism, the one with the Francis Bacon expert, but he curated it, that was 1975 I think and that was the first exhibition that just concentrated on the reviews of Dada and surrealism [*Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, Hayward Gallery in 1977], I don't think anyone had ever done that before.

AI: Yeah because Stephen Bury shows like that at British Library since which are really great. I just saw a copy of *Le Grande Jeu* [on the bookshelf] out of the corner of my eye, as well as *Documents* were you aware of these journals [at the time?].

AS: Only through that catalogue really. I can't remember his name, but I told you I met him once, there's a letter from him in the archive. That Dada and Surrealism review exhibition, up to that point, was really the only one. In the late '80s we were in that neo, geo, neoexpressionism and then there's this turn towards the YBA thing and all of that.

AI: And new British sculpture as well.

AS: Yeah so all of this stuff about surrealism nobody was really interested in that, except, well no one really.

AI: So Keiller, you were saying that Keiller was constantly, or was passing you references or suggestions. You mentioned Louis Aragon. I've got some later questions but do you remember where you picked up Georg Simmel?

AS: I got interested in that, because also Benjamin references him as well. Then I started reading *The Metropolis of Mental Life* and they're so prescient about what the urban experience is now and that was written in 1905 or something. Also they're very long-winded but there's a great mix of subjective and objective in his writing. I remember saying this to some people in Germany once and they looked at me like I was an idiot because I suppose he's seen as some sort of old empirical... yeah yeah. I wouldn't have though, having a normal art school education, SOAS and Chelsea and having access to a large university library and that was crucial. I really took advantage of that, I went to Senate House a lot and used to photocopy articles out of current journals, just things to read on the bus going home. But in a kind of autodidactic way. That was the other thing, we sort of saw ourselves as autodidacs really, in a positive, not the Sartre nauseous way. We saw that as a kind of affirmative thing, I suppose that aspect of surrealism in the journals made that more affirmative rather than making anyone feel humiliated, like you weren't a proper academic.

AI: I'm curious about Keiller's self-positioning within English Surrealism. Related to him being recognised now as an artist, I always saw him more as an architect of films or something like that. In some ways he is closer to Mass Observation so I'm wondering if he introduced you to that, how do you relate Keiller within this English tradition?

AS: Well to be fair, when I was at art school I'd written my thesis on Duchamp and the readymade and all of that, and that's why we mentioned Louis Arragon because of his petrol pump and stuff like that. But there were no found objects or anything like that, and that was as far as I went to make any kind of sociological attempt, there were no objects. He was very eccentric and I was perhaps a bit too young and naïve to get what he was on about, it happened a bit later.

AI: So it was more after seeing *London*?

AS: Yeah, yeah.

AI: You said at one point that Diana's funeral was like a mass observation moment.

AS: Yeah I can't remember where we first saw that, it might have been through the Clifford essay, he references it there. But it might have been through this book on surrealism in Britain where there's a [Humphrey] Jennings bit. We knew about *Pandemonium* as well, Paul and I, because that cut up the bulk of that religious [material]. It was almost that idea, which is actually a myth, that Benjamin had an idea of making a book that was entirely Bataille quotes, but that might have come about all of the years we were at Chelsea, all of this stuff about Mass Observation and so on.

AI: I think I have a question about tragedy and Simmel later but I came across a book by a sociologist that's about the process of Surrealism and tragedy, or the tragic, and one chapter is on Diana's funeral and one is on the London Riots so it's really recent, but it's broadly arguing that these sort of mass media events still play out this kind of representation of human suffering, how it picks and chooses them, it's quite a part of a crucial understanding of where people think they are and how they relate to the state, or who suffers, who becomes a victim, sovereign, in a certain sense. So I was wondering how you relate to that?

AS: Well when it happened we all went down there to see it [Princess Diana's funeral service] and I took photographs, we all went to go and see because it was the kind of thing, this weird manifestation of all of that. I'd never seen anything like that and that and the poll tax riots, which I wrote about in the 'Laughter' themed glossary.<sup>3</sup> That actually happened in the poll tax riots, watching these people riot, in archaic and almost kung-fu kicking these windows, and people running over cars, and I remember Charing Cross road with cars on fire and stealing electric guitars out of those vintage shops. I'd never seen anything like that, and that the Diana thing, and then you're the middle of something completely surreal, in inverted commas, and so outside of the norm that, and these things are real though, it's just dumbfounding.

AI: Were you interested in, I suppose, a sort of crowd psychology sort of element to those events?

AS: Although I didn't write about the Diana thing, somebody else did as well. Yeah well that would then come later with the whole coagulable idea that *Crowds [and Power]* by Elias Canetti connecting strange book, it's really weird.

AI: Yeah I've seen that book, it has kind of fascinated me for ages.

AS: But then going back as well, in relation to the crowds, also Paul and I were particularly aware of the poll short story and the importance of that for Benjamin and the whole idea of the flâneur and crowds and all of this, the idea of society, and they're alienation of some kind, they're back of something or they're not part of something. Those shifting parameters of experience.

AI: I feel like I have sort of, neglected mass observation. I didn't know much about it until recently and I feel like I kind of neglected it as a kind of possible influence on *Inventory*. But then I'm quite interested in, I think they talk about, putting together King Edwards abdication and the Crystal Palace fire, insisting that they're kind of linked in some way. I suppose what seems an interesting link is an attempt to render the supposedly irrational, with chance, but then to also to account for or encourage researchers' subjective experience within that. That seems to be [of interest].

AS: Well we wanted to do more of that but we never did it really. There wasn't a general collectively willingness. That's the questionnaires in Japan and then later with the motorway thing and the interviews and so on. I wanted to go more in that general direction, of kind of pseudo-sociological research, but I don't think there was a big enthusiasm for that.

AI: What's the motorway thing? What's the name of the work?

AS: That's the non-place thing. But that was a way of also trying to use, I discovered that at SOAS, [Marc Augé's, *Non-Places of Supermodernity*] that argument of anonymous spaces that don't have a sense of, whatever. I thought that was an interesting idea to use that as a kind of negative catalyst, as a way of trying to prove someone's thesis wrong. It was really as basic as that! And then it was that idea of camping out and literally trying to do fieldwork, which again relates back to the surrealist ideas of trying to interrogate western civilisations, as if they were a kind of extraterrestrial, and treat the so-called ethnic other how other, treat the white western world how they would treat the so-called ethnic other. But to do that but along the M4. But as I say it was quite a rough trip, in conditions and negotiating with the service stations was a nightmare. But there wasn't so much of an enthusiasm to pursue those kinds of projects really.

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Scrivener, 'Laughter', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.86–87.

AI: There's an odd, well it's a very kind of crude understanding, well the critique of the Mass Observation is that they began from this sociological view but then got integrated into the state through the second world war, so a lot of people were like 'you're nosey parkers', or 'you're selling the secrets to the state', so I suppose, how did you imagine *Inventory* would avoid that sort of flaw? Or is that maybe why Paul or Damian weren't interested? Obviously you weren't funded by the state, so you were more amateur distribution.

AS: Well in those things, whatever people said, we had to kind of adopt those basic ethics that come with documentary, it's about not trying to abuse someone's voice, so more of those things. Which again later with the American film, we completely went in the opposite direction and abused... . This was largely at Paul's insistence because we'd gone there with one idea, doing the same as thing as the motorway thing, and then completely reversed it when we got back. And that kind of signifies the end. But again it goes back to the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity, it's impossible, now years later it's impossible to make a completely pure, ethical representation without any kind of manipulation of some kind, it's just impossible, or taking someone's words out of context.

## Interview with Neil Cummings

*Neil Cummings and I met in person 24 April 2018. The following interview took place via email between 4 May 2018 and 1 June 2018.*

**AI:** Thanks for meeting me last week. It was an extremely helpful conversation for me. I'm sorry it's taken me a while to write up these questions. The following will focus on three main areas. The idea of research-based practice (not yet research-based art practice), interdisciplinarity and *Inventory* as an open form, developed by whomsoever contributed to it. This in turn I wish to relate to three moments in your relation to *Inventory*, these are: your time teaching at Chelsea on the MA in Art and Theory; your collaboration with *Inventory* at the Photographer's Gallery and lastly, your relationship to *Inventory* journal afterwards. In the latter, personal connections will be of equal interest to those you developed by regularly reading the journal.

When we met we talked about the formation of the Masters Programme in Art and Theory at Chelsea College of Art. Could you tell me what you know about the founding of this course, how you came to be a student and subsequently a teacher on the programme?

**NC:** I was on the first cohort of the programme in 1988. It was a part time MA in History and Theory of Modern Art at Chelsea School of Art, it ran on two evenings a week and was intended for practising artists who wanted to explore some theoretical issues related to their practice.

The two evening seminars were divided; so one had a historical focus, and the other on current theory, events, exhibitions, films, publications. And the seminars unfolded by members of staff and students leading, presenting or reading papers on topics related to their research within the two thematic strands. The seminars were for two years - you could then leave with a Graduate Diploma, or make a dissertation proposal and take another year to write a 12,000 word dissertation for a Masters.

There were about 12 or 15 of us in each year, and the course was perfect for me, it was research focussed, very self directed, slightly chaotic but very intense. It had been 10 years since my undergraduate course, I'd worked in film and TV production and had an interest in material, commodity and 'popular' culture. In some ways this was at odds with the implicit 'art history' ethos of Chelsea, although it was also challenged and encouraged.

After I graduated I was invited to give lectures, and then run some seminars on the undergraduate Fine Art Course, and then slowly to contribute as a tutor on the part-time MA.

Actually the course was fantastic, it pre-figured practice based PhD research, and nurtured a range of artists, future tutors, researchers and writers.

**AI:** When was the course set up? Who set it up and contributed to the course? What was the idea or ethos with the course?

**NC:** The course was instituted in 1988 principally by Chris Yetton and Martha Kapos, two important tutors in the Art History Department at Chelsea. Chris was a mathematician by training, and Martha a poet, and this was typical of art history at Chelsea, that it was produced by 'practitioners'. At that time there were a lot of part-time staff at art schools, you could live on a part-time wage, and so at Chelsea a mix of artists, experimental musicians, Marxist theorists, feminist historians and writers who all contributed as tutors.

This sometimes meant the course was messy, often feeling unstructured, and yet the benefits were the passion and high level engagement of everyone participating

The 'ethos' was that the course should be 'useful' for practitioners. You gained entry with a one page research proposal and portfolio, and then through presenting papers you could re-focus your research as it evolved, you could literally follow your interests. So there was a kind of meshing between the Contemporary and Historical seminar structure and individual students research interests. I should also say that 'practice' was loosely described, there were curators, critics, teachers, doctors, etc.

**AI:** Masters programmes were a new but growing phenomenon at the time, particularly in Art Colleges. The course took a particularly unusual format, lasting for 3 years. Could you say something about the course structure and the ways it distinguished itself from other Masters programmes, or other educational courses offered in UK academia at the time?

**NC:** Maybe I answered this in the previous question?

**AI:** In my work on *Inventory* I have been using John Roberts concept of 'writerly artists' to place *Inventory* in a lineage of artists who recovered the intellectual, writerly and orientations towards publishing of the avant-gardes of the '20s and '30s. What was the significance of writing within the MA course at Chelsea? How did it develop practitioners writing as a component in a wider intellectual inquiry?

**NC:** Writing was very important on the course. In each of the two seminar years students were expected to write-up one research paper as part of the assessment process, as well as the final dissertation. Each student was assigned a 'personal' tutor to generally steer the research, read drafts of the papers and give specific feedback. And most people wrote and then read papers in their research seminars, even though we tried to experiment with the format.

The presentation part of the seminars was an hour, and then an hour for critical feedback and discussion. So reading and writing was woven through the research process.

Writing was definitely one of the 'practices' nurtured by the course.

**AI:** How did an emphasis on writing and research at the course at Chelsea relate to studio practice?

**NC:** I have a feeling this was left unexpressed in course documents and handbooks. It was left for each student to develop a relationship between their theoretical research and practice, maybe this was because neither could be specified. And even when they were, or could be, both were subject to change and mutation.

Its true that where appropriate, students would present their practice at one of the seminars. But I cannot recall anyone writing *about* their practice. It was encouraged on the course to explore themes, issues, historical antecedents, contemporary parallels, or future possibilities in relation to a practice; to research or theorise congruent practices, even for writing to become your practice, but not to write *about* your practice.

**AI:** A component of my work on *Inventory* journal discusses the editorial group and other contributors' relation to the writing and publishing projects of Georges Bataille and Walter Benjamin. Could you discuss any relation between these two figures and your teaching practice at Chelsea?

**NC:** Given my interests in material culture, in museums and collecting I'd been introducing Georges Bataille and Walter Benjamin into undergraduate lectures. On the MA, I remember Susan Buck Morse's book *The Dialectics of Seeing* being very influential - for thinking about fragments, collecting, ruins, retail culture and capital, and my interest in Bataille was via Mauss, anthropology and surrealism – James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* – so using *The Accursed Share*, ideas of general and restrictive economies, of the *informe* as a disruptive process or thing. Chelsea Library has a complete set of Bataille's *Documents*.

Baudrillard too, the Baudrillard of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993) with his analysis and critique of a political economy.

At this time my practice consisted of collecting overlooked things, of making museum display cases from found cardboard, and I was also working on a huge curatorial project which eventually became *Collected* (1997) an exhibition in various museums, retail sites and homes in central London.

So these were some of the research interests that I would have been sharing when I started as a tutor on the MA course in the early 1990s.

**AI:** Were there any notable publishing projects, apart from *Inventory* which developed out of the Chelsea MA course?

**NC:** Not that I am aware of, I am aware than people published and exhibited things individually, but there was no collective effort.

**AI:** I have heard, so far, two accounts of how *Inventory* editors Adam Scrivener, Damian Abbott and Paul Claydon acquired funds for a course journal at Chelsea. They subsequently used these funds to publish the first issue of the journal. Could you provide your account of these events, the formation, publication and launch of the first issue and any disciplinary action mooted by Chelsea over this chain of events?

**NC:** My memory is that I was agitating for some way to make the research produced and shared by the course, more accessible. The seminar format was really productive, there were many great papers and presentations.

I also think, as you mentioned above, more MA courses were being developed, and recruitment was becoming more difficult. So Chris Yetton (the course leader) secured funds from Chelsea for a research publication to help publicise the MA. The idea was a collective publication, produced by the current students, and that it would be annual.

What seemed to have happened is that Adam Scrivener, Damian Abbott and Paul Claydon had the enthusiasm to produce the publication, although only they and a friend contributed - *Elephant* was a section from Adam's MA thesis, *Some Notes on Easy Listening* a paper he had presented, same for Paul's *Three Essays*, I suspect Damians' *Hall of Mirrors* the same....., or were included. That was one problem. Another was that the publication *Inventory* made no reference to the MA course that produced it.

It was a big problem.

At the drinks/launch my memory was that Paul, Adam and Damian defended the fact that no one else from the course was included, because apparently there was no other submitted material?

And they (I think) printed a sticker to append to *Inventory* Vol.1 linking it back to the MA course, although they also suggested any future publications from the course would not be called *Inventory*

In some ways the process of producing *Inventory* Vol. 1 was typical of the antagonistic nature of the editors, even to supportive networks.

**AI:** What is your memory of seeing the first issue of *Inventory* journal?

**NC:** Excited to see it, pleased to see its form and content, but the launch was soured by the lack of generosity from the editors in acknowledging their source, and a feeling of them co-opting a potential.

**AI:** Though I don't have precise dates for either of these three projects, sometime between 1993 and 1995 *Inventory* editors used the journal name as a collective title to stage four exhibition displays at the Museum



of Mankind, SOAS, the Little Magazines Collection at UCL and at the book arts bookshop or project space Workfortheeyetodo. Did you attend any of these events? If you can recall anything, what was your impression of these displays?

**NC:** I have a dim memory of going to a reading/launch off Brick Lane in Workfortheeyetodo, but don't remember anything worthwhile

**AI:** A view of *Inventory*'s orientation towards open research, collaborative practice and the journal as a cohering centre for diverse activities is central to my project on the journal.

*Inventory* journal 'as the central research spine' and *Inventory* as a 'collective enterprise intent on carving out an interdisciplinary space from which to [...] engage with, and act upon, a variety of sociological and political situations.'<sup>4</sup>

We talked about the importance of 'research' within the course at Chelsea. Could you say something of your own orientation towards research? How might this have influenced students of the course?

**NC:** Research was built into the structure and 'running' of the MA course itself, through the seminar structure - and the fact that each seminar was composed of research papers by tutors, students and invited visitors. Although maybe at the time the idea of research was less formalised, and could equally well consist of 'an inquiry' or curiosity, or interest, a vague hunch, or enthusiasm.....

What I might have contributed was the idea that 'research' could be accounted for in different ways; that writing and reading was only one possibility way. So taking artifacts to the seminars (fragments of collections), watching film fragments, listening to music clips, visiting actual places - Department Stores, theme parks, as well as Museums and Galleries, .....and that these diverse sites, and constellations of theses sites were legitimate areas of 'research'.

**AI:** What are your thoughts on the changing meaning of 'research' for artists within and outside of education during this period - 1990 to the present?

**NC:** As I hinted in the response above, within art education 'research' has been and continues to be formalised and administered. My experience is that administration, and especially evaluation - particularly as Art Schools have moved to become Universities - prefers a standardised text, something like - Introduction, methods, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography and appendices. Images? Images are treated like *figures*, evidence used to support claims made in the text. And nothing can happen without Research Ethics approval.

So *actual* research; the finding of the not yet known, the wandering, playful, wasteful destructive, the experimental in form as well as content, practice driven, the experiential, the collaborative and communal is being overwritten by something much flatter.

I could say more... .

**AI:** During the period of study of three editors of *Inventory*, 1992/3-1995/6? at Chelsea what was your impression of their student work? How would you relate it to their later development of the journal?

**NC:** I worked most closely with Adam, I was his tutor for his MA dissertation - *The Elephant*, and I attended seminar presentations by Paul and Damian. My impression was that *Inventory* was the perfect vehicle for - especially Adam and Paul - to develop their interests. It was an extension of their overlapping theoretical fields - which they both developed on the MA course - and their passion for publications. I knew Damian less well, and had the feeling he had more of an 'activist' background,

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<sup>4</sup> Both quotations from Adam Scrivener, 'Curriculum Vitae'.

was embedded in political networks, especially related to housing (?) so, I'm not really sure.

**AI:** You mentioned that some of your work between 1993-97 converged around the concept of Collection. Could you tell me about how the exhibition at the Photographer's Gallery came about and how the collaboration with *Inventory* worked in relation to this multi-sited project?

**NC:** Uff, big question. As I mentioned above, I was interested – for a very long time, and probably still – in how the idea of a 'collection' as a transversal theme, that could incorporate national institutions - The British Museum, and discrete personal obsession – the 'egyptomaniac', a vast range of 'things', and enable me to research curation and exhibition as a creative practice.

So I managed to persuade Paul Wombell the then director of the Photographers Gallery to be the host – there was an exhibition there using photography as object of and medium for collecting – and then I negotiated – it probably took a couple of years – with a range of other exhibitionary or collecting institutions, and commissioned artist to work in, with, or to exhibit in them. Artists like Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson, Susan Hiller, Richard Wentworth and institutions such as Sir John Soane's House, Habitat, British Museum Selfridges and The Wallace Collection.

There was a conference too, *Collected*.<sup>5</sup>

I'm not sure there was a collaboration with *Inventory*. I probably mentioned it to Adam, and or Paul, and we probably discussed a special issue of *Inventory* to coincide with the *Collected*.<sup>6</sup> The thing was, I was so busy, it was crazy thing to try and organise and I'm sure they were too that I don't remember much communication or coordination. Marysia Lewandowska, who I was working with at the time contributed to the journal, as did Calum Storrie – 'From Soane to Soane' text, he was an exhibition designer at the British Museum.<sup>7</sup> But I don't remember having much discussion or exchange over the content, or how it meshed with the exhibition or events...

**AI:** Did *Inventory* participate in the exhibition? How much input did you have into the journal issue?

**NC:** See above

**AI:** There is an early current of interest in collection in *Inventory*'s initial formulations around the journal, there is obviously the notable special issue and the displays and exhibitions I have mentioned. However, there is also a sense of *Inventory* as a collection in its own right. How would you relate this to the ways in which you were thinking about collecting?

**NC:** I think one of the things that was great about that MA course, is that 'research' and ideas were shared, so I think there was a collective attention to the idea of an index, inventory, glossary, collection, to classification, waste and expenditure.

**AI:** I'm also curious about how a discussion of 'things' which is both ethnographically or sociologically inflected and owes something (possibly through Benjamin) to a Marxian analysis of the centrality of the commodity to late-20<sup>th</sup> century social life seems integral to your own practice and projects and those of *Inventory*. How do you understand this apparent shared interest in the inquiry into the 'social life of things'?

**NC:** Maybe the emphasis on the term 'thing' evolved out of my MA dissertation *Sculpture and the Alibi of Use* (1990) which explored the possibility of utility offering some resistance to the semiotic freefall of much postmodern cultural discourse. The thesis was reconfigured and became the premise

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.neilcumplings.com/content/collected-0> [Accessed 7 March 2019]

<sup>6</sup> *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997 *Collected*, 26 April to 21 June 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Calum Storrie, 'From Soane to Soane' *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2 1997 *Collected*, 26 April to 21 June 1997, pp.44–60.

of a book I edited called *Reading Things* (1993).<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, Marx, De Certeau, Morse, Heidegger, Clifford, etc, were touchstones. So yes a Marxian analysis of the commodity was central, but also exploring sites of resistance through use, appropriation, refund lost things, (I also made a book entitled *Lost Property* (1995) with Marysia) the abject...<sup>9</sup>

I think 'thing', like 'collecting' is a term that ruptures hierarchies, flows through institutional contexts and is a bit awkward, although a productive awkwardness.

As I mentioned above, the great thing about the MA course is that I would have been sharing research as these various projects developed, through the seminar structure. And at the same time, as a tutor, attending seminars to listen to the research of Adam, Damian and Paul. So I think you are right to identify a shared or collective interest in 'the social life of things'.

**AI:** You mentioned you were an enthusiastic reader of the journal, but also that some students, Michael Ricketts and Richard Bradbury ended up contributing to the journal. Could you tell me about any other students who might have contributed? How did these submissions come about, or how were they handled?

**NC:** Enthusiastic indeed. These are the only two students that I can remember, and they would have been undergraduates. I would have been the BA thesis tutor, and after their graduation I would have suggested they submit to *Inventory*. I probably would alert Adam to the possible submission, and then leave it at that. I was always alert to possible contributors.

**AI:** In a sense this suggests some surprising continuity between *Inventory* journal as Abbott, Claydon and Scrivener's own organ, and as a journal for the course. Does this ring true at all? Did members of *Inventory* ever present at the course after graduating?

**NC:** There was no continuity that I am aware of between the part-time MA course, and the *Inventory* of Adam, Damian and Paul. I think there was a course publication for a while... .

There was a continuity of ideas and interests, but little more.

Yes, I think it was common for past students of the MA to return and share their ongoing or past research, so I am sure that Paul, Adam and Damian would have done the same.

**AI:** Did you make any contributions or submissions to *Inventory* yourself during this time?

**NC:** No, I never managed to get around to it... I would have been worried about rejection.

**AI:** Are there any other figures associated with the journal that you knew, or met through the journal and its associated events?

**NC:** Not that I recall

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.neilcummings.com/content/reading-things> [Accessed 7 March 2019]

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.neilcummings.com/content/aphasic-disturbance> [Accessed 7 March 2019]

## Interview with Nick Norton

*I met Nick Norton in person in July 2016. This interview was conducted over email between 16–31 July 2016 (the last question is included from a separate interview conducted over the same period, specifically addressing ‘The Profound Purchase’. Norton and I continued to correspond and meet when possible throughout 2016–18. Further correspondence with Norton via email is cited in the thesis.*

**AI:** What was the editorial process, as far as you were involved in it as an editor of the journal?

**NN:** I never had opportunity to be hands on with the journal’s editing. I was a part of discussions, long rambling sometimes drunk discussions if I was in London. I usually stayed at Adam’s flat in Dalston when I visited. I talked on the phone, I wrote letters... . Eventually realised that not many people enjoyed writing letters in the same manner as I did... . Did not get onto email until 1998, when I began work at Cardiff Architectural School as a library assistant.

There was a definite series of email exchanges about the *Estate Map* piece because I recall one of Adam’s emails got scrambled by a glitch and we fed that back into the piece as those last few stuttering sentences.

The material for *Cream* was worked up in a single meeting at Paul’s flat above the bookshop.<sup>10</sup> Agreed a strategy wherein our entry would become as if an edition of the journal with front cover then entries following; we thought it would be possible to go to the Phaidon designers and manipulate the material we sent in their design process. Naïve perhaps, of course it did not happen and they just pushed it together as they saw fit, but at least we got the ‘front cover’ in there correctly.

If functioning collectively, there was a discussion and then someone would agree to write something. It was never, ‘I will write this up’; there were no notes taken or recording of conversations.

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<sup>10</sup> *Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture*. London: Phaidon, 1998.

In terms of exhibition creation, a good example of collaboration was putting together the Prague British Council Window Gallery show. If you have not seen pictures of this then I have some somewhere. On the flight out we were laughing at the single rather old fashion brief case which Adam carried because in it there was to be an entire window display. Two of three windows had pre-enlarged photos installed with text running along in English and Czech. The last window, the largest, was a piece of collage created in situ. We were informed that the Queen was visiting this outpost of British culture shortly after our visit. (It also seemed utterly bizarre that the artist following on from us was to be Laurence Weiner.) Because of this it was implied somehow that a certain restraint was needed. The secret services would check out our display first! This was fantastically apt for Kafka's home town. The trip was certainly a Kafka pilgrimage. Anyhow, we had to discuss censorship quite seriously (although I doubt anyone would have stopped us putting anything up. A curtain may have quite literally been drawn over the offending window however). The basis of the collage was to be the 'Time to Go' found text.<sup>11</sup> We decided to make a virtue of censorship, highlighting potential inflammatory phrases by the use of elastoplast, and of course making it ridiculous. The wounded image. We ended up putting a photo portrait of Antonin Artaud grimacing as he wrote in the centre of this display. Another wonderful thing about creating this show was how we were sat in the corridor at the base of a stairwell, monopolising a few tables and couches with the spewed contents of that briefcase and filling the space with our incessant smoke and talk.

I think a great many decisions had to be taken pell-mell, on the hoof. We all lived chaotic lives, some more than others; thus it often happened that if a person was not there at that particular moment then the editorial decision happened without that person. I will want to return to this point, it gets at the nature of collaborative enterprise, and it is also the point from which a lot of the group tension arose.

**AI:** What was the editorial process, from your perspective of writing for the journal?

**NN:** On occasion I got to line-edit my own pieces. This was not always a success. Technology has eased the editorial process significantly since the journal's inception! (Sharing files, etc.) Very often we were working on incompatible computer systems (or earlier, as with the 'Profound

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<sup>11</sup> A Found Text, 'Time to go Only', *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.3 1996, pp.88–100 and Found Text, 'Time to Go Only', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.51–65.

Purchase' text, on a manual typewriter). Items were saved on floppy discs, discs were corrupted or lost, formatting often got mangled. The inclusion of images in a particular place within the text was always a pain. This mattered most on the 'Evil Eye' text & 'Beyond Zero'.<sup>12</sup> When it came to 'Unsettled Pattern' I decided to run all the images at end, a sort of essay in echo to the text, simply to make the editing easier.<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps your question is less about these nitty gritty issues of construction and more concerned with how *Inventory* came about finding and choosing its content?

**AI:** You were one of the most, if not *the* most, prolific contributors to *Inventory*.

**NN:** I think Paul & Adam wrote most. Many of the *Inventory* authored material came from them – or just Adam perhaps – and they wrote as individuals also. I did try to provide something for each issue however. I wanted to write & also I wanted to write for this group because I felt I was part of *Inventory*. This was a place for a mode of expression which did not need to be genre bound. I codenamed my writing for *Inventory* Thesisfiction, giving me a freedom to tackle the topics as I chose, without having to worry about any pre-existing expectations.

For example, for a good while immediately after graduation I was trying to write science fiction, working on the presumption that this was a space within which my imagination and choice of scrutiny could be easily smuggled. The best science fiction seemed to be a fiction par excellence for smuggling. Still is, last time I checked, but the question of 'the best' versus the majority is another thing. Actually it may go the other way, and the idea of scifi as an inherently subversive genre becomes a cranky cliché. There is also the not inconsiderable matter of craft, just to flag up how arrogant I was. I failed as a science fiction writer (or failed to get stories accepted in *Interzone*) perhaps less because of any editorial aversion to my cunning subversion and more because of inept plot and character.

**AI:** Can you broadly summarise your other writing activities for *Inventory*? How did your own writing process relate to the temporality of the journal? e.g. Would you write on a topic requested by *Inventory* editors?

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<sup>12</sup> Nick Norton, 'EvilEyeLive', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.15–38 and Nick Norton, 'Would You Believe it/A Report from Beyond Zero', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.38–42.

<sup>13</sup> Nick Norton, 'Unsettled Pattern', *Inventory*, Vol.5 No.1 2003, pp.80–110.

**NN:** The Collected issue was a callout, in itself responding to an invite from the exhibition curators. Estate Map & the writing for Cream was an agreed agenda; however these topics were already there, in the discussions we had, and in our mutual interests. Some of the glossary entries also, perhaps like a game of exquisite corpse but with text. We would draw the body of the entry not knowing the others' input. No one to my knowledge ever said: Hey! Let's make a surrealist game out of this. I guess we had all dealt with surrealism as part of our formation so it never seemed odd to create in such a manner.

**AI:** Did you work to deadlines, i.e. did you contribute knowing you would be published in a specific issue?

**NN:** Deadlines, if known, were rarely mentioned. That ordered communication of: we will go to print by such a date; please send copy by: this just never seemed to happen. It was more a matter of accumulation; once the weight of it was such that an issue might be possible, then the publication moved toward print. There was also the issue of money. As far as I know, each issue funded the next therefore we needed to wait until some had sold. Adam paid a printer in the basement of SOAS cash in hand; collecting the boxes of journals always had to go out the back door through the basement. Simon and I did this once, we taking the boxes directly, by foot, to the Horse Hospital for our launch event whilst Adam and Kate, using her car, collected a stack of beer.

**AI:** Would you write something then simply send it off to the Inventory editors regardless of deadlines/or tailored to them?

**NN:** Mostly, yes.

**AI:** Were any of your writings rejected by Inventory editors?

**NN:** Some pieces never got in especially smaller Glossary items. Metalanlinguistica was cut down to one section.

**AI:** Where any of your writings substantially changed by Inventory editors?



**NN:** Metalanlinguistica was cut down to one section, this because of the length of it in full. (Full text eventually arrived here: <https://bookleteer.com/publication.html?id=2979> )

A lot of images I provided got subsumed into the accumulation. I was very surprised to see one such piece appear on the front cover of Design Week. It was a footballer with shirt over his head cut from a newspaper at least 3 or 4 years previous to its eventual publication: I had drawn the Jarry spiral (also Mason's labyrinth / gut reference) on his belly and named it Acephale (or some-such). This appearance in Design Week was for the Becks 2003 exhibition; the football match performance was to be staged then and the cutting must have resurfaced appropriately. I gathered after the fact that it was part of a computer file which should have been reproduced with more *Inventory* added content. Adam snarled about the ICA (or Becks?) people not knowing about software used (I cannot imagine DWeek designers did not know, so maybe they were provided with just the image.) I did not get involved in the Becks exhibition. Naomi (our daughter) was born in 2003 and communication between the group was pretty bad by this point.

**AI:** How would you characterise your material means of correspondence and communication with *Inventory* editors?

**NN:** Okay... . Maybe the above story gives a flavour. I'd send stuff, it would reappear or not. When I went down to London I would rescue stuff if I could, if I remembered to do so. The writing I usually considered more important than the images. There would be long conversations, often not directly about journal content although, really, everything was focussed through or toward this entity known as *Inventory*.

At some point in Cardiff, after I had graduated from an MA in Writing with a complete novel which I wanted to have published, I began to sense the tensions of a collaborative identity operating without a well-functioning collaborative process. My writing had to be more its own substance, unless there was a definite state of working when *Inventory* was *Inventory* in a full, reciprocal, and honest way. If my writing was included as my writing alone then it should be acknowledged rather than submerged into the *Inventory* collective when it suited.

Life as *Inventory* was getting increasingly intense for Adam and Paul, there was ever more to do,

for which we all said hurrah!, but then that ad hoc NEED NOW moment excluded the other voices from a decision making process.

When those decisions involved someone turning up at a paid gig there were uncomfortable moments. Damian managed to always stay inside this intense Adam-Paul orbit partly, I guess, because he always had other projects on the go. (In the big scheme of things I must step aside from talking about Damian, we never got chance to know each other as well as I would have liked. I have many good memories of him, but there are also times when I am sure I annoyed him).

For me, as I was living outside of London, I accepted that physically I could not be there for everything. Nonetheless, it was upsetting to find whole projects developing without any apparent attempt to include more people in the conversation. Now, given the current state of technological communication, I wonder if this might ever have been different? Actually, my presumption is that even if email etc was as accessible then, as it is now, the characters involved would still *not* have set up a sufficient and organised manner of collaborating.

By the time *Inventory* were/was exhibiting as an artist it was hard to keep up/keep connected. Very early on I had argued that this was an art project and there was no harm in considering *Inventory* an artist when the context suited. My main reasoning was that, if we do not want to work, then this should work for us and, therefore, be art. I don't think art is work when it is done well, but one should be paid for it whenever one gets the opportunity! This whole concept of *Inventory* admitting it was art was met with fury and bile, which was perhaps needed in order to stop the project too quickly slipping into the quagmire of 'simple' (gallery bound) success. We needed time in our personal wilderness to develop. And in the first instance the notion of any art related showings, never mind sales (of anything but the journal), did strike us as fairly unlikely.

[...]

*Inventory* never actually set out a full statement concerning collaborative activity, and in our conversations we never categorically described how we were going to function; therefore any hurt or personal insult is entirely an emotive, personal state. The group cannot be accused of failing its group ethos because it was never there. What was there were a series of working presumptions, friendships in fact. It is only under the duress of time, as relationships evolve, that we begin to

question or reassess the starting point. In the brilliance of retrospection it is obvious that each participant in *Inventory* came to it with their own already created persona and all the mechanisms chugging away behind this mask. It is entirely each individual's fault that those set of expectations and presumptions were not at the time scrutinised, laid out, and assessed. And in equal measure, *Inventory* may never have been *Inventory* if such a grown-up, grounded approach was adopted from the start.

[...]

**AI:** How do you reflect now on your writings for *Inventory*?

**NN:** The items I still enjoy I have posted – with slight modifications – on <http://nicknorton.org.uk>  
But why should I have wanted to do that, you ask?

**AI:** Which other *Inventory* contributors did you know personally before the journal came about?

**NN:** Adam, Simon, Tony deSilva; from Middlesex Polytechnic. Also Jake Miller was at Middlesex. He runs *The Approach* and gave us the first slot there, before it was done up in its white cube garb. Later he represented *Inventory* for a while.

Patrick Keiller worked at Middlesex; he was my final year tutor and although not an easy person to have a crit with he was definitely important. My education with him actually felt useful and exciting. Apart from the students (and the technicians), very little else about that course in those years can be commended, definitely not contextual studies! (Or was it called Art History way back then?)

My 2<sup>nd</sup> year essay was supervised by Peter Webb; off hand, disinterested (this urban study having no overt erotic content perhaps): 'Who is this Guy Debord?' he said, 'I've never heard of him.' 2<sup>nd</sup> year was the year I discovered the Situationist International, I think via Patrick Keiller.

Patrick came to the pub with us once (after graduation); I think we were trying to recruit him to write something for *Inventory*. He was filming London at the time, so he ruled himself out for that. He was however supportive and interested all along. In relation to your thoughts on *Inventory* and the city, I suggest you look into Patrick's work. Adam mentioned meeting Patrick at the Century City opening. He was congratulated in Patrick's typically bone-dry manner for having

‘made it in’.

**AI:** Were there writers whom you personally got involved in the journal, either by commissioning them directly/soliciting writing or suggested that they write for the journal?

**NN:** My brother, Dan, wrote a piece.

**AI:** What were the material circumstances that enabled you the time and resources to write for *Inventory*?

**NN:** 1990 1995 I was unemployed in Leeds. Shocking the amount of spare time I won and somehow managed not to use – I say retrospectively. Metalanliguistca was in its first full form finished during this period. Floating Island was perhaps written during this time also. Must have been because... 1995 moved to Sheffield to do MA in writing. Word from Adam came about the money from Chelsea, could I send some stuff. I did, about three things, ‘Floating Island’ was chosen.<sup>14</sup> I skipped my first tutorial session in the Writing a Novel module in order to be at the opening. I started doing occasional work as a promotions person in 1996. This was because of a link made when I put together a series of video programs for Bradford Festival TV, this going out on local cable. I managed to get quite a good roster of people, without a budget. Just saw the tape recently. Excellent Birdyak footage, a Peter Brotzmann solo... Douglas Gordon taping up his mug to make monster self-portrait... etc. For your interest there are two *Inventory* pieces. Damian sent up edited footage and soundtrack separate which I edited together. The tape was also shown at The Approach gallery – first showing. Paul a bit miffed that he had never seen the pieces and this, in reverse, was as mentioned a process which happened several times over.

Anyhow, the promotion work was acting as a camera for Spiced TV – making tapes of people in clubs and pubs getting free samples of Morgan Spiced Rum and being Spiced People! Horror, the horror... . The opening scene of EvilEyeLive with pants being dropped to reveal apotropaic tats is directly from this job... But basically I was still unemployed.

I met Frances, my now wife, and moved to Cardiff with her in 1997. Various agency jobs then the library job; in 2000 we had intended to move to London but it all went pear shaped for various

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<sup>14</sup> Nick Norton, ‘The floating island’, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.1, 1995, pp.54–60.

reason and we ended up here. Pudsey is my hometown, Leeds is Frances' hometown, so we had family to cushion us before getting jobs.

[...]

### **Addendum: On The Profound Purchase**

**AI:** Thanks so much for sending me the profound purchase. It's a really interesting text for me, and definitely fell across the path of some of the ways I was thinking of the journal itself.

There is an anthropology underpinning the text, which proposes that man is incomplete, unfinished, 'unwhole'. This is presented in a way pan-historically, situated in 'cultures, ethnology, societies, civilisations'. Yet, this is also described as if an illusion, yet an irreversible one, it cannot be reset, reversed or undone. In a sense the text's account transposes Marx's account of real abstraction, a process which has no (one) precise beginning and no end, away from capital as a system (he does also describe capital as a kind of subject) and into man as a subject. It's a compelling account and I'm wondering whether, since you refer to capitalism and state capitalism, there is a historical specificity to the thesis or not.

The text seems to hedge both ways – i.e. the problem is transhistorical and specific to capitalism. I know this is an unnecessarily tricky question because obviously you wrote the text a long time ago, but I'm curious how you feel about it now, or then if you can remember?

**NN:** The text can only be written from out the capitalist state as that is the author's context. Nonetheless, there is an intuited form of being swelling up beneath the world of 'consumer choice'. These are termed 'activities of consciousness'. I consider these to be both controlled (colonised) and free (actively non-productive). Activities of consciousness both predate the current norms, contributing to the formation of current norms, but likewise stretch beyond the normal currency of our everyday in order to anticipate and create that which is not controlled. The 'stretching beyond' is for now and a future, it is also always present historically, if one notices. There is nothing inevitable about the norms of the present which impose a sense of lack on living persons. Paradoxically, it is the sense of lack which drives the creative endeavour wherein the lack is compensated for. So, I think, the sense of lack may be either colonised/controlled or free/actively non-productive as in a similar manner the compensatory movements to fullness are. It is not an either/or binary, despite the fact that much of the text is compelled to work itself out in the language of contrasting opposites.

(This term 'actively non-productive' is derived from Raoul Vaneigem I suppose.)

I think we imagined the Profound Purchase as a mechanism of consumerism which bore within it an inherent instability. It 'promised the world' in a form which was neither a promise (solemn oath, honest transaction) nor the world, nor possible world; not the riches of the moment and certainly not the transformative step from here into what might be. All too often any purchase, profound or otherwise, quickly dissolved down into the world as it was, therefore proving nothing other than the necessity of the process starting again. Because of this constant *begin again* the profound purchase is well suited to capitalism; even so, in its unstable functioning it likewise demonstrates failure.

If we recognised this instability and sought to bring this feature to the fore then it was in order to create a playful arena.

If we could provide an object (we were thinking specifically of a publication) whose appearance could evoke the Profound Purchase, then there was a possibility of decolonising activities of consciousness. We wanted to play.

# **An Essay on Benjamin's Journals**



# Benjamin's Journals

Benjamin's journal projects are hardly comparable with those of Bataille, since not one saw publication. However, even in their absence they are notable in their ignition of shared themes of early romantic philosophy, critique, crisis and community.

In 1905 Benjamin attended a progressive school in Haubinda, Thuringia, under the tutelage of the educational reformer Gustav Wyneken.<sup>15</sup> Between 1910-1914 Benjamin contributed to Wyneken's journal *Der Anfang* (The beginning) and participated as the spokesperson of the newly founded Sprechsäle, [the forum of the Free Students' Association]. With other affiliates Benjamin planned a journal closely bound up with the formation of an ideal community.

In a conversation with Carla Seligson in 1913, Benjamin drafted his vision of an ideal community, whose only bond would consist in sharing a secret. A community, as a letter to Seligson reads, 'is bound by the acute consciousness that solitude remains insuperable.'<sup>16</sup>

The plan for the journal fell apart shortly after the outbreak of war in 1915 when Seligson's companion, Fritz Heinle, with whom Benjamin had made the plans<sup>17</sup> committed suicide in condemnation of the war.<sup>18</sup> The ideal of community as well as its impossibility was further distilled in Benjamin's next project for a journal entitled *Angelus Novus* (after the painting he owned by Paul Klee).<sup>19</sup>

the journal should forgo all appearance and simply express the truth of the situation, which is that even the purest will and the most patient labor among the different collaborators will prove unable to create any unity, let alone a community. The journal should proclaim through the mutual alienness [*wechselseitige Fremdheit*] of their contributions how impossible it is in our age to give a voice to any communality – even though this common forum might suggest otherwise – and should make plain to what degree even this connection remains on trial only.<sup>20</sup>

Benjamin's conceived of the journal as an organ for exploration of the very difficulty of community, it would be a medium for sharing 'mutual alienness'. After the failure to get *Angelus Novus* off the ground, in the early 1930s, in conversation with Bertolt Brecht, despite his exile in France and Brecht's exile in Denmark, Benjamin planned a new ambitious international journal entitled *Krise und Kritik* ('Crisis and Criticism').

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<sup>15</sup> Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008 contains a substantial treatment of this period of Benjamin's life.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Alloa, 'The Inorganic Community: Hypotheses on Literary Communism in Novalis, Benjamin, and Blanchot', *Boundary 2*, vol.39, no. 3 (1 August 2012), pp.75–95, p.80, quoting Letter to Carla Seligson, August 4, 1913.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Gershom Scholem, August 4, 1921, in Benjamin, GB, 2:178.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Inorganic Community' op. cit., pp.80-81.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin attempted to form this journal in 1921 on behalf of the editor Weißbach. Ibid., p.81.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Announcement for the Journal *Angelus Novus*', (Trans. Rodney Livingstone) in Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings (Eds.), *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume-1, 1913-1926*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, pp.292-296.

From the autumn of 1930 to the spring of 1931, Benjamin and Brecht, with Bernard von Brentano and Herbert Ihering, and with the help of Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Alfred Kurella and Georg Lukács, were planning to bring out a periodical under the name of *Krise und Kritik* ('Crisis and Criticism'), to be published by Rowohlt in Berlin. They envisaged a journal 'in which the bourgeois intelligentsia can account for itself in regard to positions and challenges which uniquely – in current circumstances – permit it an active, interventionist role, with tangible consequences, as opposed to its usual ineffectual arbitrariness.'<sup>21</sup>

Benjamin's intellectual ambition in the face of catastrophe could scarcely be overstated. In September, 1939 Benjamin was sent to an internment camp near Nevers, in southern France. After a train ride and a forced march, the prisoners were assigned to the abandoned Château de Vernuches, which had been transformed into a labour camp.

Benjamin wanted to suggest to the camp commander to publish a literary journal 'of the highest level, of course', a camp journal for intellectuals [...] Benjamin was very serious, almost ceremonious. He didn't seem to be aware of the comical-macabre side of the situation.'<sup>\*</sup>

According to Benjamin, the journal, the plans for which were found in Berlin, should have been titled *Bulletin de Vernuches: Journal des Travailleurs du 54e regiment*<sup>\*\*</sup> and was to be distributed not only among the detainees of Nevers but was also gradually to reach 'all the other camps disseminated in France.'<sup>\*\*\*</sup> It was to include sociological analyses of camp life, critiques of the improvised musical and theatrical performances within the camp, as well as a book section. The journal was thus to be an ultimate demonstration of the power of the spirit at the moment of its utmost desolation.<sup>22</sup>

As a precarious emigré his familiarity with *Documents* and other ambitiously internationalist journals, as well the network operations of surrealism and its fringes, may have driven Benjamin's confidence. Equally, desperation may have been the driving force for ever more fantastical imaginary journals. Nonetheless the desire to meet crisis conditions with reasoned and critical intelligence persisted throughout these projects. Whether *Inventory* knew these journal projects or not, the prospect of developing 'a sociology' of even the direst crisis conditions perhaps had a resonance for *Inventory*'s editors amidst the dwindling prospects and urban devastation of Thatcher's Britain.

<sup>21</sup> Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht The Story of a Friendship*, (Trans.) Christine Shuttleworth, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009, p.66 quoting Walter Benjamin, Memorandum zu der Zeitschrift 'Krisis und Kritik', GS VI, p.619.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Inorganic Community' op. cit., p.78 quoting \* Hans Sahl, "Walter Benjamin im Lager," in *Für Walter Benjamin: Dokumente, Essays und ein Entwurf*, Ingrid und Konrad Scheurmann (eds.), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992, p.120; \*\* Chryssoula Kambas, 'Bulletin de Vernuches: Neue Quellen zur Internierung Walter Benjamins', *Exil* 10, no. 2, 1990, pp.5–30 and Walter Benjamin, Sketch for the camp journal *Bulletin de Vernuches* (1939), Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Nachlass Walter Benjamin, Nr. 31. Reprinted in Scheurmann, eds., *Für Walter Benjamin*, p.127.

# Glossary: Exposé

*Here I briefly survey a few key terms from Inventory's Glossary section. Through this I pursue an analysis of the Glossary through an exposé in the form of a glossary, by making my own 'glosses' on, and in parallel to, Inventory's and those of Bataille's Critical Dictionary.*

## GLOSSARY

### Comply

The most common geological formation; the psychological dimension of which invites an enthusiasm for articulating space as layered in its vertical dimension and gridded in its horizontal. Not to be gainsayed, in the manner of desiring ones own repression, there exist very few properly alternate constructions. These are characterised as being peripatetic and marginal in all dimensions (political, economic, sexual, etc.), an example would be Beckett's Molloy. Although much of human culture can often be seen as an admixture of these two competing formations, it is definitely the case that compliance dominates, to such an extent that it has become impossible to conceive of a state beyond it.

### Comply<sup>2</sup>

A submission, adherence to laws, influences and suggestions. Acceptance taken to the level of a perversion; when obedience is this exact it overwhelms the law giver, leaving them lacking in speech and so in awe of the servile entity that their existence becomes untenable without that which complies.

N. N.

### Comply<sup>3</sup>

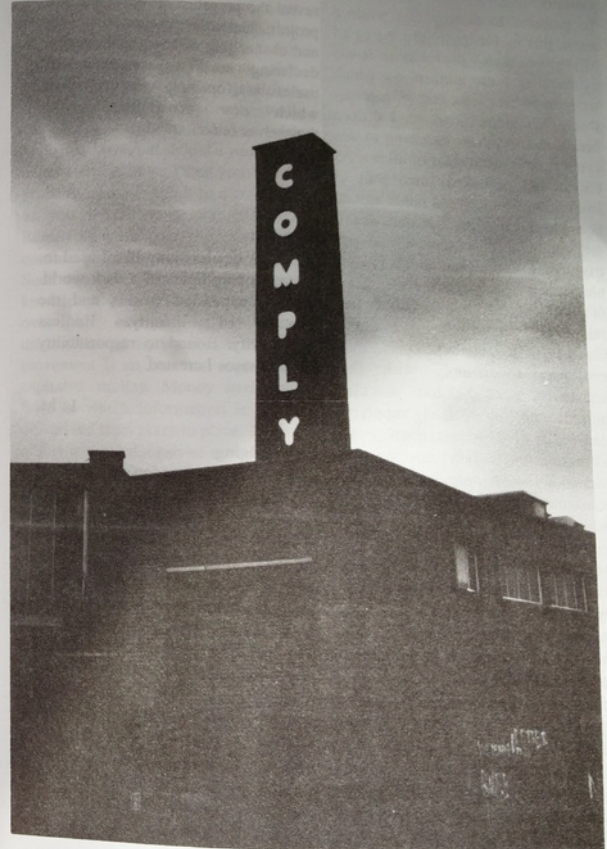
*"He that complies against his will is of his own opinion still"*

Butler

Implying action that goes against the natural course of events, either that or enforcing the natural course upon those who are seen in some way to deviate from it. This begs the question, does compliance make life easier or harder? Further, is compliance (or lack of it) a question of conscience or faculty, physical or metaphysical? The answer lies in the problem of sovereignty, compliance to the will of others or compliance to ones own will, the latter implies that the individual is further rent by a dualism, the existence of contradictory drives within one's self, as, undoubtedly, there is in any external pressure to comply. There will always be dissent, but that is not what is at stake here, what is at stake is belief or freedom from belief, freedom from the opinion of others, certainly, but perhaps more difficult to achieve, freedom from the opinions of your self...

P. C.

Glossary



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Image: Simon Neville, Nick Norton and Paul Claydon, 'Comply' in *Inventory* Vol.3 No.1 1998

## Comply

‘Comply’ in *Inventory* Vol.3 No.1 1998 formed of entries by Simon Neville, Nick Norton, Paul Claydon, Adam Scrivener, is the *nec plus ultra* of *Inventory*’s glossary section.<sup>23</sup> It expresses best the fortuitous possibilities of convergence through the medium of objective chance. The symbolic object at which each of the four most regular *Inventory* contributors’ prose was targeted has both an exoteric – an everyday landmark, a former factory thus evidence of Thatcher’s policy of de-industrialisation – and esoteric relevance, the image directly recalls the famous factory chimney discussed in an entry by Bataille in *Documents’ Dictionnaire Critique*, a tower and a word play, perhaps a Tower of Babel. The tower of Babel represents, as Derrida puts it, ‘the myth of the origin of myth’ – the origin of misunderstanding; of lies; poetry; of the need for translation between cultures and peoples, the need immanent to *Inventory*’s Glossary for *another* interpretation; to supplant, rival and transform the previous.<sup>24</sup> A third register and marshalling theme of the four entries: compliance, is provided by the name of the plywood factory which had embossed the factory chimney with the company name: ‘Comply’. The object is therefore seen to elicit a series of startled realisations, an everyday object provokes unusual thoughts in each of the four writers. It lays plain the means by which the journal established ‘a dialogue with its readers whereby new constellations of thought and image come together’, quickly switching between writers encouraged readers to turn writers and vice versa.<sup>25</sup> Through close and imaginative attention to the registration of text on the surface of the city an everyday object is read *differently* by four writers. We can say it has written them as much as it has been read by them. The origin of the object is severed from its intentional purpose. This designates it as ‘found’, and foundness, or arbitrariness, here, must be understood to coincide with, if not be integral to, the economic forces which caused it to be built and profitably employed, and subsequently fall into disuse.

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<sup>23</sup> Various, ‘Comply’ in *Inventory* Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.46–47.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’, in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985, pp.165–207, p.167.

<sup>25</sup> *Indent*, op. cit., p.34.

## CHRONIQUE

### DICTIONNAIRE

**ABATTOIR.** — L'abattoir relève de la religion en ce sens que des rituels des douces routines, sans parler de nos jours de ceux des hindous) étaient à double usage, servant en même temps aux implorations et aux tueries. Il se trouvait sans aucun doute les prestes au jour d'après l'aspect de ceux des abattoirs actuels) une coïncidence inadmissible entre les coutumes mythologiques et la grandeur légale caractéristique des lieux où le sang coule. Il est curieux de voir d'ailleurs en Amérique un pays lointain : W. B. Seabrook (1) constatait que le vie originel a subsisté, mais que le sang de sacrifice a été pas même une malade, trouve insipide les mêmes attitudes. Cependant de nos jours l'abattoir est modifié et ses quarante-cinq comme un lotus portant la croix. Or les victimes de cette malédiction ne sont pas les bœufes ou les animaux, mais les hommes gens courtois qui en sont arrivés à ne pouvoir supporter que leur propre laid, leur dépendance en effet à un besoin insatiable de progrès, de petite bêtise et d'argent : la malédiction (qui se trouve que ceux qui le préfèrent) les amène à végéter assésés que possible des abattoirs, à s'occuper par correction dans un monde amorphe, où il n'y a plus rien d'horrible et où, même l'abandonné inflexible de l'ignorance, ils sont réduits à manger du fromage. — G. BATAILLE.

(1) L'Als magasin, Firmin-Didot, 1929 (cf. plus loin, p. 334).

**CHEMINÉE D'USINE.** — Si je tiens compte de nos souvenirs personnels, il semble que, dès l'apparition des premières chaudières à vapeur, au cours de la première révolution, pour notre génération, les formes d'architecture terriblement étaient beaucoup moins les mêmes, même les plus monumentales que certaines grandes cheminées d'usine, véritables tours de communication entre le ciel sinistrement sale et la terre devenue envahie des quartiers de Sluzz et de ténérailles.

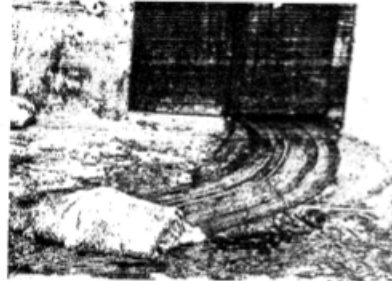
Après tout, dans que de tels minuscules esthètes, au milieu de leurs chaudières solitaires, investissent placeaient la beauté des usines, la légèreté même de ces énormes tentacules et appareils d'autant plus monstrueux, les fuyons d'une sous la pluie, à leur pied, dans les terrains vagues, la fumée noire à moitié



Chimée d'usine haute de 40 mètres  
Bâtiments de Londres

ralenties par le vent, les monnaies de tourter et de richesses sont bien les seuls attributs possibles de ces diables d'usines d'argent et se tiennent pas balancés lorsque l'état change et que nos terreur ne faisait disserter dans nos épouvantails gâteaux, qui se attirèrent jusqu'à l'empêcher et aussi parfois nos finesses (sur en courant à toutes jambes, la présence d'une effrayante colère, celle qui, pensais-je si en droit, était devenue plus tard nos propres colères, donner un sens à tout ce qui se salissait dans nos sites, et en même temps à tout ce qui, dans des sites créés, surgit comme la charge dans un universel. Dans doute je n'ignore pas que la plupart des gens, quand

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Aut. schéma de La Villette (cf. p. 328). — Photo El. Latac.

Image: Pages of Documents Vol.1, No.6, 1929, containing Georges Bataille entry, 'Cheminée D'Usine/Factory Chimney'.

# Eye

The image of the eye, that ‘object of such anxiety’ which was provided for no less than four entries, by Bataille, Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos and Marcel Griaule in *Documents* No.4, is invoked in *Inventory* by Nick Norton’s essay ‘EvilEyeLive’ and several Glossary entries, ‘Secrets’ and ‘Remote Control’, and of course the draft unpublished cover discussed in Chapter 1.<sup>26</sup> Norton’s essay is perhaps the most ambitious, a study of the (evil) eye in folklore, myth, magic, popular culture, sex, symbolism and slang. In ‘Remote Control’ by Adam Scrivener, the remote is understood as ‘an extension of the eye or the hand’, related to reading and ‘moving through an unknowable whole’ it is an index of ‘changes in social organization and modes of thought’, the shift in emphasis towards the eye in the ratio between human senses.<sup>27</sup> In a sardonic aside to another text, Nick Norton locates the ‘occluded eyeball’ at the initiation of ‘modern painting’.<sup>28</sup> Whilst distinct, these studies find complementary resonances both with each other as well as the *Documents* entries, in ‘EvilEyeLive’ Norton extends the threads of these capsule studies much further. What emerges is an account of the eye which is historical not just in its plotting of a continuum of anxiety in human culture around it, but in its development of these anxieties in their relation to modernity, the waxing of symbolic ornament in vernacular culture and its sublimation into the ‘new’ media of TV and video. The eye is not only a cipher for desire. Recovered from surrealism, it emerges, in *Inventory*’s paradoxical publishing practice, as the mobile locus of curiosity-anxiety a nervous interface expressive of humankind’s incompleteness and alienation, but also its ability to reflect constructively on its own experience i.e. produce theory of worldly phenomena.

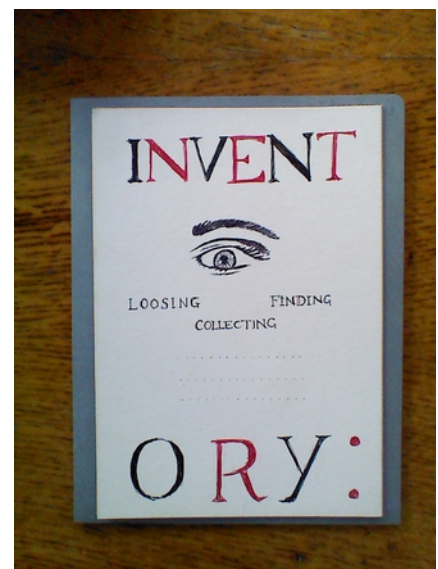
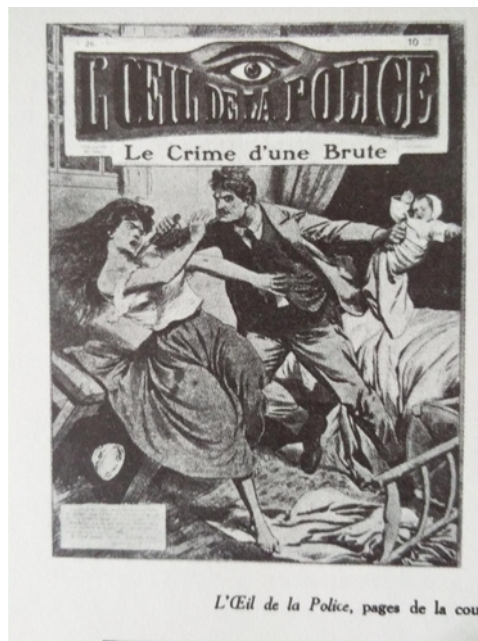
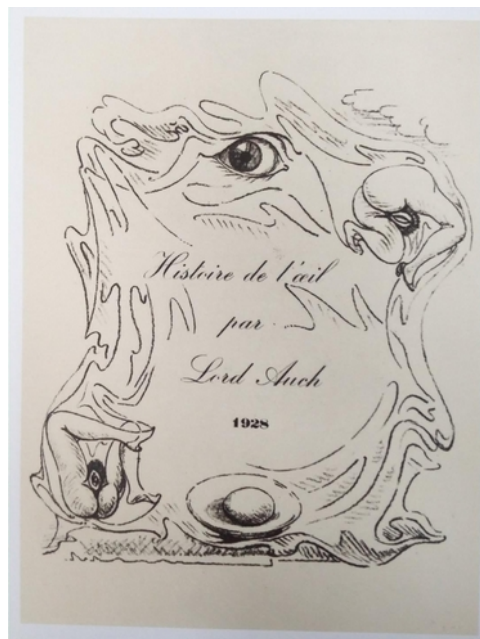
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<sup>26</sup> Quoting Georges Bataille, ‘Eye (Cannibal Delicacy)’ in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, op. cit., p.45. Adam Scrivener, ‘Remote Control’, Glossary, *Inventory*, Vol.1 No.2 1996, pp.91-92; Nick Norton, ‘Secrets’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1 1997, pp.81-82; Nick Norton, ‘EvilEyeLive’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.2 1999, pp.15-38.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Remote Control’, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Nick Norton, ‘Bring Me the Head of Georges Bataille’, *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.1, 1997, pp.91-104, p.92.





Images: (from top left) Andre Masson, cover illustration for Lord Auch (Georges Bataille), *Histoire de l'œil*, 1928 (centre) *L'Œil de la Police*, 1908 (right) Grandville, *First Dream: Crime and Punishment*, 1820-47 (both reproduced in *Documents*, No.4, 1929); (bottom left) Francis Picabia, *L'Œil Cacodylate*, 1921; (bottom centre) Fig.5 in Nick Norton, 'EvilEyeLive' (centre); and (bottom right) Inventory mock-up cover, c.1994.





Figure 1. Graffiti a Cap Martin



Figure 2. Elevage de poussière ("Poussière")

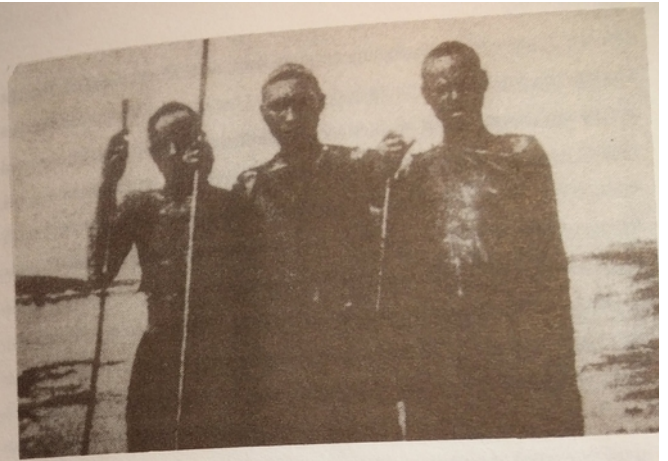


Figure 3.



Image: Illustrations to Eric C. Puryear, 'Dust in the machine: Le Corbusier's Graffiti A Cap Martin'

## Dust

Feminised labour is dismissed in Bataille's 'Dust' entry, albeit in telling terms by which philosophy's dependence upon it can be construed. The repressed status of reproductive labour, both discursively and financially, is negated through its shock reappearance in contributions in *Inventory* which take up the nominalist gestures of modernism (Duchamp) and conceptual art, the fetishising of lists and 'information' to strongly imply the absence, socialised invisibility and abjection of certain forms of labour.<sup>29</sup> I have previously mentioned the list of library tasks inserted into *Inventory*'s contribution to their special issue, 'Collected'. Aligned as they are with two photographs of street markets, one of paintings mounted on street railings and one of bric a brac laid out on a blanket on the pavement, we are forced to consider them as also items for sale: increments of the commodity of labour power us. Each are also 'collections', but the worksheet is a collection of tasks which in turn supports an existing collection, of books. Disturbing is perhaps the listing of forms of labour on other's labour, outlining the hierarchy which lurks behind the horizontalising list: the 'checking' of others' (often female others) work. Whilst efficiency (time) is always in view, work is shown to tend towards entropy, the work on work, endless recursion. The second installment of the found text, 'Time to Go Only' (1998) discussed previously, opens with a list associating common work-related terms: 'tortured to death – only; working life – only; livelihood only; office worker – only, non-worker only; non-worker only'. Later this turns to work tasks themselves: '– Shorthand – ninety – 90 words – per minute – A minute; – Pitmans shorthand'.<sup>30</sup> The list must have been labourious to write, it is labourious to read. The list makes a gesture of mimesis towards the forms of labour it describes (broadly speaking secretarial and administrative work), yet it is handwritten and places both labour and non-labour on a plane with violent murder – 'tortured to death – only'. The text might be thought of as an account, or measurement, of a life, a last testament before 'time to go'. Enumeration in the list form suggests a flattening of items (inventorising) but also accounting, counting, evaluating. Victoria Halford's 'Contract' is a visual essay which features a very similar list to the library worksheet, but here the tasks are those of a cleaner, precisely the now commodified variety of entropic reproductive labour dismissed by Bataille's definition of

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<sup>29</sup> Victoria Halford, 'Contract', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.92-97, includes a tasksheet, list of duties or contract for 'Cleaners: Female', pp.94-96. *Inventory*, 'Inventories', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.84-87 includes editor, Adam Scrivener's, library duties tasksheet, p.87.

<sup>30</sup> Found Text, 'Time to Go Only', *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.1 1998, pp.51-65.

‘Dust’.<sup>31</sup> This worksheet has resonances with the legacy of an ambitious project carried out by Margaret Harrisson, Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document of Women’s Labour in Industry* (1973–75) which turned the administrative tools of conceptual art towards the documentation of women’s labour. Reminding us that the ‘Contract’ in such abjected and devalued work often simply comprises of a description of the work to be done, as well as a very generic – ‘Cleaners Female – description of the worker’s essential characteristics, with scant means Halford’s essay stages a disturbing conflation of medical confinement and work as confinement, presenting a medical contract for a patient to a Detoxification unit alongside the worksheet. We do not know whether the pressures of the work contract is what led to the necessity of detoxification or if they were possessions of the same person, nonetheless they are presented alongside each other for readers to explore what associations may come to mind.

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<sup>31</sup> Victoria Halford, ‘Contract’, *Inventory*, Vol.3 No.3 1999, pp.91–96.

LISEZ :	NE LISEZ PAS :	LISEZ :	NE LISEZ PAS :
Heraclite.	Platon.	Lautréamont.	Kraft-Ebbing.
	Virgile.		Taine.
Lulle.	St Thom. d'Aquin.	Rimbaud.	Verlaine.
Flamel.		Nouveau.	Laforge.
Agrippa.	Rabelais.	Huysmans.	Daudet.
Scève.	Ronsard.	Caze.	
	Montaigne.	Jarry.	Gourmont.
Swift.	Molière.	Becque.	Verne.
Berkeley.		Allais.	Courteline.
	La Fontaine.	Th. Flournoy.	M <sup>me</sup> de Noailles.
La Mettrie.		Hamsun.	Philippe.
Young.		Freud.	Bergson.
Rousseau.	Voltaire.	Lafargue.	Jaurès.
Diderot.			Durckheim.
Holbach.			Lévy-Brühl.
Kant.	Schiller.	Lénine.	Sorel.
Sade.	Mirabeau.	Synge.	Claudel.
Laclos.		Apollinaire.	Mistral.
Marat.	Bern. de St Pierre.	Roussel.	Péguy.
Babouf.	Chénier.	Léautaud.	Proust.
Fichte.	M <sup>me</sup> de Staël.	Cravan.	d'Annunzio.
Hegel.		Picabia.	Rostand.
Lewis.		Reverdy.	Jacob.
Arnim.	Hoffmann.	Vaché.	Valéry.
Maturin.		Maïakovsky.	Barbusse.
Rabbe.	Schopenhauer.	Chirico.	Mauriac.
A. Bertrand.	Vigny.	Savinio.	Toulet.
Nerval.	Lamartine.	Neuberg.	Malraux.
Borel.	Balzac.		Kipling.
Feuerbach.	Renan.		Gandhi.
Marx.			Maurras.
Engels.	Comte.		Duhamel.
	Mérimée.		Benda.
	Fromentin.		Valois.
Baudelaire.	Leconte de Lisle.		Vautel.
Cros.	Banville.		Etc., etc., etc...

Back cover of a  
catalogue of books  
issued by José Corti,  
Paris, 1931.

IMP. UNION, 13, RUE MÉCHAIN, PARIS

Image: 'Lisez, Ne Lisez Pas', Back cover of a catalogue of books issued by Jose Corti, Paris, 1931 reproduced in Dawn Ades (Ed.), *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed: A Brief Guide to the Exhibition*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978, p.546.



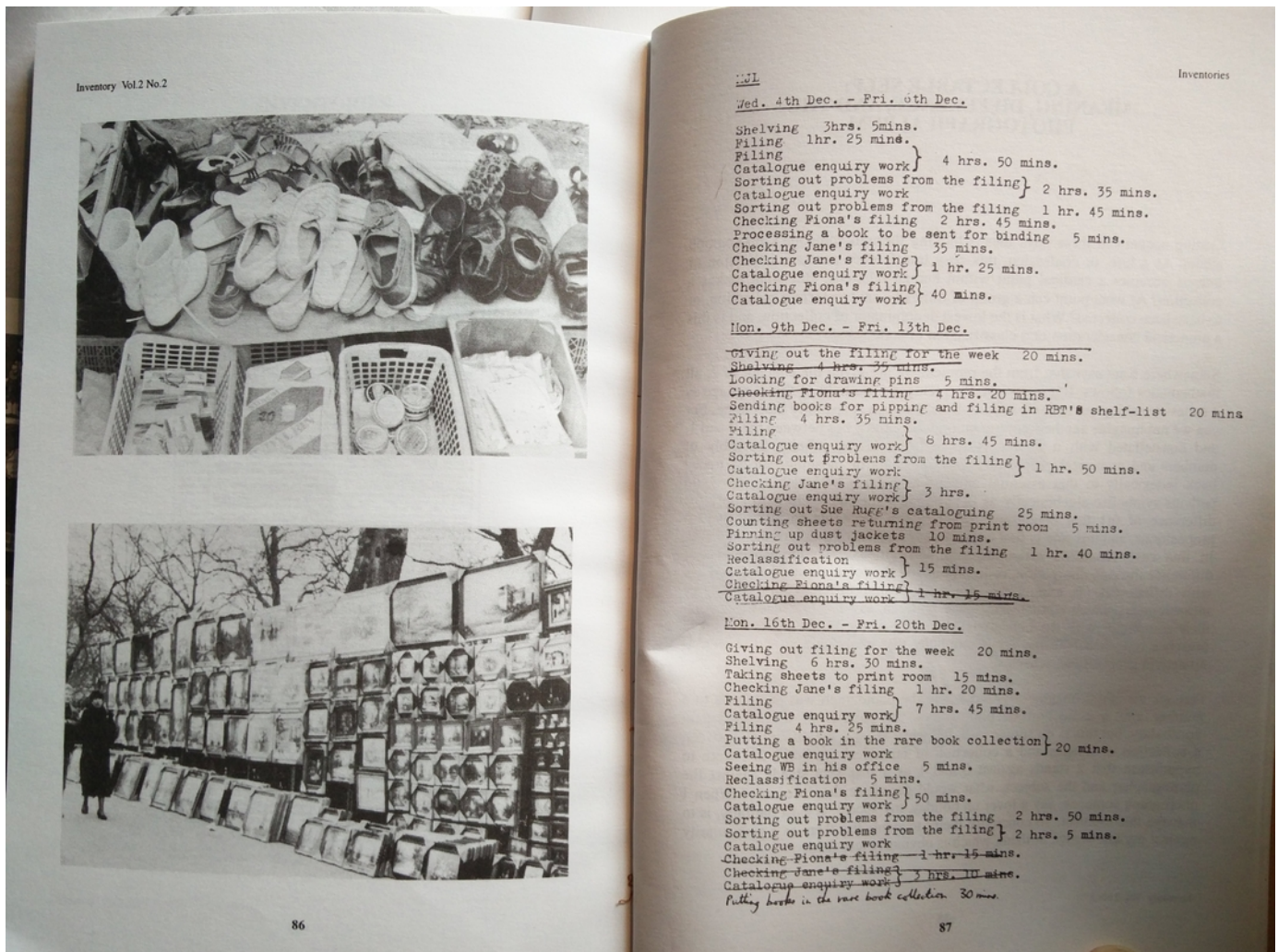
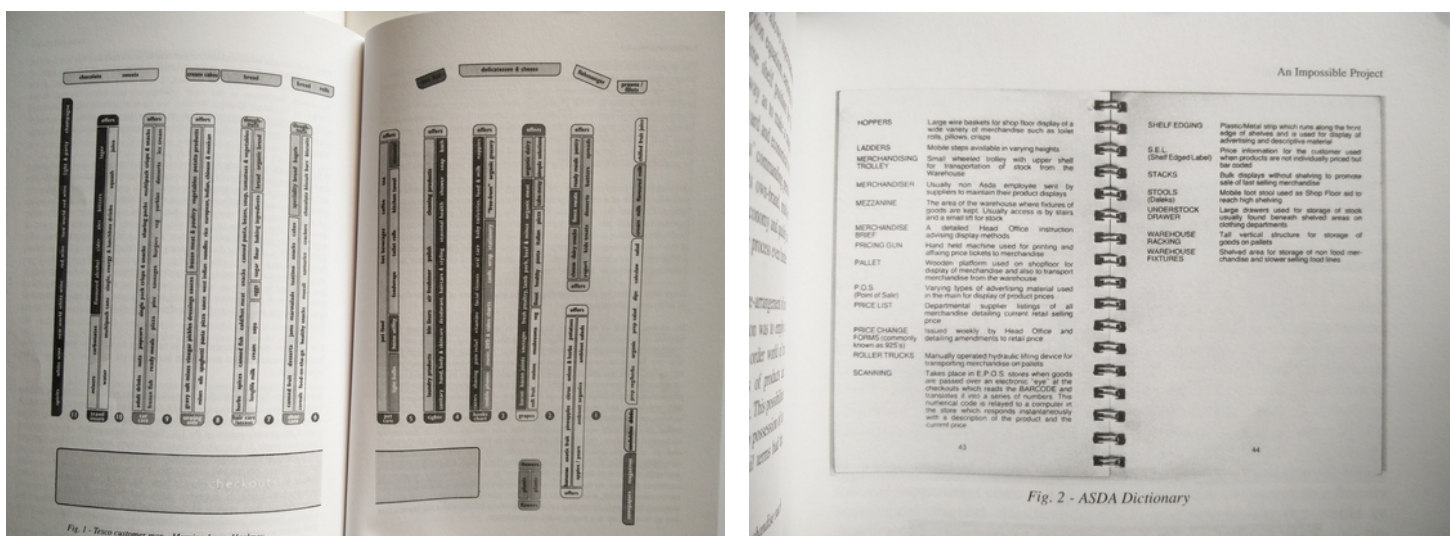


Image: Adam Scrivener's, library duties tasksheet (p.87 right). Inventory, 'Inventories', *Inventory*, Vol.2 No.2, 1997, pp.84-87, pp.86-87.



Images: 'Tesco customer map - Morning Lane, Hackney' (left) ASDA dictionary (right) Inventory, 'An Impossible Project', *Inventory*, Vol.5 Nos.2 & 3 2005, pp.150-159



CLEANERS

FEMALE

Timings - Monday - Friday, 7.00 am to 4.00 pm

7.00 am PROMPT

Clean 1B Ladies Toilets and sinks. Replenish soaps and toilet rolls as necessary. Wash floor and splash back. Report faulty hand dryer as necessary.

Clean Bridge Ladies Toilets and sinks. Replenish soaps and toilet rolls, tissues as necessary. Wash toilet floors and Hoover.

7.30 - 11.00 am

Clean banqueting rooms according to daily list from Housekeeper, in meeting starting time order. Dust, Hoover, empty and wash ashtrays. Wash skirting boards. Clean between double glazing. Brush carpet edges. Clean window ledges, fireplaces, brasswork and air conditioning units. Lounge Bar - before 11.00 am - wipe tables and polish. Hoover and wash between double glazing units. Dust wood paneling, polish chairs, wipe pictures and frames. Wash radiators, empty and wash ash trays, polish Bar top, mop floor behind bar. Polish mirror behind bar, clean glass paneling on door and brass handles.

(8.00 - 8.30 am)

Breakfast break.

(10.00 - 10.15 am)

Break.

Hoover Banqueting Corridor. Brush carpet edges. Clean skirting boards, wash paintwork and clean brass plates on doors.

11.00 am

Restaurant:- Thoroughly Hoover carpet. Mop exterior Carvery surround. Wash window ledges, including between double glazing. Wash alcove and ledges. Polish and clean all brass and glass.

12.00

1b Ladies and Bridge Ladies Toilets to be cleaned and checked, tiles to be washed.

12.30 - 1.00 pm

Lunch break.

1.00 pm

Banqueting rooms continuation. Clean and Hoover as necessary for evening/late afternoon functions.

2.30 pm

Lounge Bar

2.45 - 3.00 pm

Break.

/Continued.....



6:15 AM: GET UP, MAKE  
BREAKFAST  
7:30 AM: CALL DAUGHTER  
7:35 AM: LEAVE HOME  
8:00 AM: START WORK  
12:30 PM: FINISH WORK  
SHOPPING  
1:05 PM: ARRIVE HOME  
LUNCH, REST  
1:45 PM: DO HOUSEWORK  
4:30 PM: PREPARE DINNER  
WASH UP  
6:30 PM: SIT DOWN  
7:30 PM: HUSBAND'S DINNER  
8:30 PM: IRONING  
10:00 PM: MAKE COFFEE  
11:30 PM: GO TO BED

ELENA JONES AGE 54  
1 SON AGE 17 1 DAUGHTER AGE 11

RIVET MACHINE OPERATOR  
PART-TIME 8:00 AM: - 12:30 PM:

Women and Work: A Document of  
Women's Labour in Industry (1973-75)  
detail

Image: Margaret Harrisson, Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document of Women's Labour in Industry* (1973-75) detail

## Photo Booth

In Adam Scrivener's meditation on the Photo Booth, an object and technology widely prevalent in the 1980s and very-early 1990s often installed in the dreary local outposts of the administrative State, such as Post Offices and hospitals, the physiognomic is treated historically. Scrivener reflects, '[p]erhaps the photobooth is the last trace of the physiognomic in that it attempts to capture the basic characteristics of a person for the purposes of assessment and approval.'<sup>32</sup> Its output, or product, 'the passport photograph', 'plays a role as an arbiter of freedom, of movement, it permits and denies.'<sup>33</sup> The Photo Booth is therefore 'a civil servant', but as a mediator of the State it was to be a vanishing one. The iconic Photomatic and Auto-Photo analogue black and white machines were superseded by colour and then digital machines.<sup>34</sup> The black and white reproductions of four-strip Photo Booth photographs which accompany Scrivener's 1997 article were most likely originally printed in colour. In the UK more Photo Booths remained in use later than the USA, suggesting a closer relation between their use and their 'civil servant' role. Indeed there was even a certain lag between the disappearance of these machines and the closure of the typical sites of their location (post offices, pharmacies, libraries) and their requirement as an administrative standard by the UK passport agency and various visa agencies based in the UK. Even if Scrivener asserts that the images produced 'have other purposes and potential meanings' (p.74) their administrative use overcodes them, they remain a locus of an 'anxiety' – both the state's need to know and fix identity, to collect the 'head[s] of the citizen[s]', and 'an absence which provokes within us a longing'.<sup>35</sup> For Scrivener the images formed by their functions, they are 'masks, fetishes, contracts, declarations, artefacts, moments consciously or unconsciously chosen', but they also 'hover' 'between evidence and enigma'.<sup>36</sup> If the 'physiognomic' was on the wane, then its displacement was to be through machines which would overcome this state of uncertainty – digital cameras, and phone cameras which incorporate metadata and traceable records of ownership combined with a shrinking state which required fewer interpretative operators at the administrative strata. Benjamin's interest in the 'physiognomic' was obviously not in the service of the control and classification of citizens, he instead saw it close to his method of finding socio-cultural and economic meaning in the surface detail of phenomena. The disappearance of what was 'physiognomic', for *Inventory*, coincides with the advent of machine-readable photography. Where Scrivener points to an opacity in the passport

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<sup>32</sup> Adam Scrivener, 'Photo Booth', *Inventory* Vol.2. No.1, 1997, pp.73-79, p.74.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.73.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Bloch, 'Behind the Curtain: A History of the Photobooth', <http://www.panmodern.com/photobooth.htm>

<sup>35</sup> 'Photo Booth', op. cit., p.73 and p.75.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.77.

photograph, this ties it to what he calls the ‘impossible nature of being’ for which the photographs are traces of ‘the unceasing desire to render experiences into some “intelligible form”’.<sup>37</sup> Therefore in the paradigm of the Photo Booth as a technology and its anticipated outmoding *Inventory* recognise another defeat of classification, neither ‘being’ nor ‘experience’ can be made ‘intelligible’ nor fully enclosed by the photo booth or passport photograph. However, this challenge to classification perhaps misrecognises the will to ‘record, to classify’. The Photo Booth’s ‘machinic element’ in retrospect already appears as part of the advance towards the kind of experienceless and non-interpretative knowledge and classification of the digital era. In this paradigm the space for interpretation and ‘longing’ produced by the mechanics of the passport photograph is erased.<sup>38</sup> The growth of a circulation of images and data handled (almost) entirely by machines certainly attenuates, if not eradicates, the ‘experiential flows’ *Inventory* were interested in bringing to the fore.<sup>39</sup> Marx’s contribution to this current of thought, which was substantially developed as an anti-ocular tendency in Post-war Marxisms, turning around man’s anthropomorphism suggests both a form of enchantment and a perceptual prison of sorts:

Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image: everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive.<sup>40</sup>

This thesis, pioneered in the post-war period by Guy Debord and others,<sup>41</sup> that late-20th century society would be increasingly be mediated by an accelerating succession of images can be complicated, as Nick Thurston writes, by through the realisation that the dominance of images depends increasingly on a much less visible dependence on language below the surface.

although the surface of life is constantly being flooded with images, its depths, structures, flows, and our interactions with them have proved to be more dependent than ever on written language, [...] The really new features of twenty-first century life are reforming life under the surface – in relational networks that we only have limp

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.79.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx quoted in Guy Debord, ‘*Theory of the Dérive*’ in *Internationale Situationiste*, No.2 December 1958. Marx’s statement, notably quoted in a text by Guy Debord on Situationist urbanism, establishes the ground upon which surrealists and situationists would explore, practically and theoretically, humankind’s self-image and apperception of that image in a *landscape* which is urban in character. This is in Marx, Benjamin and in Debord the scene of a tragedy or tragic vision, which we will come to examine more closely as this chapter develops.

<sup>41</sup> ‘The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.’ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), New York: Zone Books, 2012, p.12.

metaphors to describe [...] so we need to read everything and anything legible below the surface in ways that go beyond seeing.<sup>42</sup>

This state actually licenses *Inventory*'s turn to writing and publishing as a medium for looking 'below the surface things that go beyond seeing'. Attention to language, appropriation and re-fashioning of common sense in order to complicate it through writing addresses those phenomena which 'are reforming life under the surface' in newly legible ways.<sup>43</sup> After Benjamin and Bataille, *Inventory* embrace a constellation of methods which could facilitate the production of new experience and new knowledge, but this system would also hold open a space for 'non-knowledge', 'forgetting' – objects and experiences resistant to *knowing* at their core.

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<sup>42</sup> Nick Thurston, 'The Mediatization of Contemporary Writing', in Annette Gilbert and Hannes Bajohr (eds.), *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, pp.90-98, p.91.

<sup>43</sup> Here there are shades of Rosmarie Waldrop's thesis that the perceived exhaustion of language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century actually spurs an 'impulse towards experiment'. 'There is also the notion that language was adequate in some mythical good-old-days, but is used up and exhausted by modern mass media.' – Rosmarie Waldrop, *Against Language? 'dissatisfaction with language' as theme and as impulse towards experiments in twentieth century poetry*, The Hague & Paris: Mouton, 1971, p.9.